**Illuminate Me**

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**Illuminate Me**

*by* [Half_SubmergedinPurgatory](http://archiveofourown.org/)

**Summary**

Tony isn't a healthy man. He's fine with that, really. It makes perfect sense. Unfortunately, he has a job to do that kind of has his health as a major requirement. So he unmakes himself, remakes the Accords, protects every single child super that enters his field of view, and hopes ferociously that the Avengers never come back to the US. He doesn't spend any time at all rebuilding Bucky Barnes' life. Not a single second. Anything he does that contributes to him is simply an accident.
Bucky is a patient man. It's ok if Tony wants to ignore him for now. He won't be able to forever.

(Somewhere in the world, a sense of dread crawls up the back of Tony's spine)
Pathetic Fallacy

Coming back from Siberia didn’t change anything for Tony. His "home" was wrapped in the same cold oppressive silence as the bunker. He didn’t feel any less shattered in the US.

Though, he supposed Siberia felt more distant now. Everything did. His emotions felt like a heavy fog rolling out over the sea, suffocating anything that tried to float in the unnaturally still water. A storm was coming, but it wasn’t there yet. He could picture it in his mind's eye: ozone burned his nose and the sky had taken in a sickly yellow cast, but the storm wasn’t there yet.

Almost two weeks in, the storm broke. Both literally and figuratively. If he was in better condition (his chest ached worse with every breath), Tony would’ve laughed.

“Pathetic fallacy,”

He used to say to Rhodey, back when he was young and whole and storms would fall over his exam dates and he could grin at his rain soaked friend (when rain was biggest threat to Rhodey’s health and his biggest worry was walking...oh god...walking in it).

“Thunder and lighting!”

Rhodey had cackled despite his best efforts to remain pissed about the weather (his books were wet and he had bitched about buying new ones for ages),

“Enter three witches!”

Tony had wrapped himself in a bedsheets, slinging one around Rhodey as well, absolutely ruining them for the night like an idiot, but Rhodey had laughed. Tony had always tried so hard to make Rhodey laugh.

Shaking off the memory, Tony stared at the gathering storm clouds and mumbled under his breath,

“When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?”

His hand tightened on the cheap plastic phone in his pocket. Turning away from the window, placing his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose, and drawing an exceptionally (alarmingly) painful breath, Tony went to his doctor’s appointment (the beginning of the end).

“You already knew there were hairline fractures in your artificial sternum, Tony.”

Helen said, snapping out her hand to slap his raised one out of the air, glaring at him reproachfully,

“Don’t you dare try to lie to me. I can’t make you take care of yourself, and I actually value the fact that you at least trust that you can come to me when it’s dire, so I won’t bother threatening you or getting into an argument about this.”
She sighed, running her fingers through her hair in a distinctly Pepper-like movement. Her long (dry, cracked, and clever) fingers caught on a snag, and he nearly laughed (Pepper would never - maybe he should send a stylist out to Helen. Was that insulting?).

“Your sternum is artificial, Tony. It doesn’t…it doesn’t grow back. It doesn’t heal. A fracture turns into a fissure with this. The whole thing has shifted and is putting pressure on your chest cavity. The soft tissue there is already damaged, your bruising is putting one hell of a strain on your breathing already, and your diaphragm is still swollen from whatever blunt force trauma it has been through.”

Tony grimaced. Why was it always the torso with him? It had been through enough already and pushing the wrong side of 50 wasn’t helping at all. God, just getting up in the morning was...well, maybe that had more to do with the rolling fog on the horizon of his mind than oxygen deprivation. At least, he hoped so (hah, since when had depression been the better option?).

“It’s going to need to either be braced, in which case you CANNOT risk damaging it again, which honestly I already know isn’t going to fly with you, OR you’ll have to surgically replace it.”

Yep, that was pretty much what Tony had feared, somewhere off 39 degrees and several miles from the main issues his mind had been focused on at the time (not dying, not letting Barnes escape, kicking Steve in the shins until he couldn’t wa-no. No. No no n- Helen is here. Focus on Helen). She was watching him, sympathy showing so obviously on her face that it nauseated him. He waved her onwards, shifting his gaze to a wall behind her.

“I don’t know if you’ll survive another surgery, Tony. The scar tissue in your chest is exceptionally thick and it has already compressed your chest cavity. Cutting through it again would further reduce your lung capacity. That kind of scar tissue will also place additional pressure on the sternal plate and has a risk of growing over it. There’s also the risk of you developing plurosis - it’s honestly a miracle that you haven’t yet - and a billion other factors I can’t account for. I don’t like it. I can’t exactly grow you healthy grafts with the cradle, either.”

The words tumbled out so quickly Tony barely had time to process them before Helen continued,

"I can’t remove all of your damaged tissue without killing you."

She took a deep breath, allowing her uncertainty to show (he remembered the first time he’d decided Dr. Cho was worth every single piece of praise he’d heard about her. When she walked into the dick swinging contest of a medical engineering conference on a guest’s invitation, where she was supposed to speak about her hospital’s expertise and nothing else, with untested technology and no trace of doubt in her eyes).

“I prefer you alive, Tony. If that’s not good enough for you, I have more points to sway you to invest in my idea for not going under the knife.”

She tried out her version of his Vegas showman’s grin. Somewhere, far far away from the still waters in his mind, Tony was reluctantly charmed.

“James needs somebody, will need somebody for years while he recovers, and you’re that somebody. Ms Potts needs her R&D whiz. I’m pretty sure Mr Hogan wouldn’t have any reason to drive fancy cars without you, and you and I both know it’s not a hobby he’ll indulge in without a reason. Your employees would miss you.”

His face must’ve twitched or something (Rhodey had worn an expression, way back when, so far
back Tony had to crane his neck to make eye contact with him, that was a dead-ringer for the first
time Jarvis saw the scruffy nearly bald cat Tony had hidden in his closet. “I wanna be mad at you,”
Rhodey had said, though Tony couldn’t remember why, “but your stupid Bambi eyes are doing the
whole “here is my entire soul and I am very sad, please don’t yell at me” thing and I’m a very very
weak man.” Jarvis had struggled with those eyes too, tried to shield Tony from the world, though
Howard still beat the shit out of him when he found out about the cat). Helen’s eyes narrowed, and
she clicked her tongue in displeasure.

“Your employees love you, you idiot. They run a Twitter that is pretty much exclusively photos of
you being a dork in the labs, being a dork during employee reviews, being a dork in their email
inbox...they enjoy it. You’re the reason they work where they do.”

Tony knew about the Twitter, of course. JARVIS used to...used to keep tabs on it. When he was
alive. Fuck. **Fuck**, he was tired.

“What am I supposed to do, Helen?”

He finally sighed, pressing his knuckles into the thin dry skin of his eyelids until he saw stars
(*something else that had been ruined for him. Wow, wasn’t he just a barrel of laughs today?).

“I need to go before the council. I need to work. I need to be Iron Man. I can hardly get up in the...

The fog in his head was thickening, swirling and condensing, turning into something horrible and
dark. To his horror, his face heated up in the tell-tale way that told him he was going to cry.

“In the morning. Breathing sucks and this SUCKS and things are going to go very VERY badly if I
look weak for too long. This whole thing is already fucked and it’s hinging on the one fucking finger
I have on the wheel!”

He snarled, trying his best to beat the tears back with anger but...Christ, Helen didn’t know half of
what was going on. She couldn’t because it was classified and completely irrelevant to her anyway.
She didn’t need him to...

Her fingers (**dry, chapped, and split in more places than he could count from countless washings - it
always struck him, how clean Helen’s hands were**) closed over his own, prying them away from his
mouth.

“You’re Dr Stark.”

She said, smiling at him without any doubt in her eyes (**swaggering onto the conference stage, ballsy
as anything**),

“And I’m Dr Cho, the smartest person in the room. Two geniuses in front of a problem. We’ll think
of something.”

And for the first time in weeks, Tony huffed out a genuine laugh.

“Three geniuses. We need to bring Dr Rhodes into the fold, if only to remind him of the true
meaning of research. My sour patch’s brain is going to rot in the military.”

(“**When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightening, or rain?** Helen would make an excellent
witch. She was a history maker, after all.”)
Tony met with the council with his chest braced. He was sweating bullets the entire time, doing damage control while his lawyers reviewed a running transcript of everything, sending suggestions in real time to a teeny text log in the corner of his sunglasses. Tony didn’t like testing his luck with these people any more than strictly necessary, and them finding out about this kind of leak would bring everything down in flames, but he couldn’t afford to be anything other than the best of the best right now. He had to use every inch of showmanship (*every ounce of every stage in Vegas, every slicked back salesman he’d ever met, every politician, every overly decorated general*) he had to deflect away from the makeup on his face, the extra bulk in his suit (*slight as it was*), or how shallow his breathing was.

He got the council to ban the entry of the rogues (*a cute nickname packed with a lot of bitterness*) into any of their countries, with the guarantee of capture leading to a court date, instead of hunting them down like rabid dogs. He ensured that everyone placed directly into the line of fire of the Accords squabble (*not a WAR*) would be compensated by the council in an act of goodwill. He made sure not to shove his own standing further into jeopardy while niggling at Ross’ like a loose tooth.

Finally, exhausted, he stealthily directed their attention to his meowness. He knew exactly where the rogues were and, honestly, T’Challa could fucking deal with the consequences of his own actions. If that meant covering up their presence or owning up to it while hiding behind diplomatic immunity, well he was sure T’Challa could handle it.

Nintencatz sent him a picture perfect replica of the offended cat stare. Through the fog and pain and the sweat chilling his everything, Tony felt a petty spark of satisfaction.

Extremis was Tony’s worst nightmare. He was fascinated by it, used to pull out a dozen projects on it on nights he couldn’t sleep, had completed more work on its potential capabilities than he cared to admit…but he did that with all his worst creations. The worst things never left him alone. His mind never stopped, and the worst things were all the best in varying aspects: destructive power, speed, strength, and the body count left behind.

Extremis had killed more people than it could ever save. It could never be used to just save a limb or two. It couldn’t ever be used like the serum either. It wasn’t dormant, waiting for a single-use activation. Extremis was always on, always needed to be used, too much energy to be contained in a single body (*he empathized with the concept and then promptly tried to forget he ever had*).

It was a catalyst that would chew up every single reactant available to it in seconds unless constantly redirected. Unless it was isolated from the reaction immediately after achieving what it was meant to
achieve.

It would have to be controlled - conscious and unconscious, just like every other component of a complex biological system. It was no surprise that Tony had almost immediately thrown nanobots into the mix. It was no surprise that he aimed to have them controlled by a consciousness. That he gave that consciousness computing power by extending its reach through all available resources (spreading out across the worldwide net, server farms, satellites and-).

It had just been for storage at first. But then he couldn’t ignore the possibilities presented by information traveling two ways. Of an AI that could access anything and upload a person with the information they needed. And then, because sharing a headspace would be uncomfortable with any new AI, because that would force one of his children to see his thoughts and experience his feelings to some degree, Tony had thought; why not just be his own AI?

He’d completely broken what it meant to be human in his attempt to fix Extremis. He didn’t know...he didn’t know if he could live that.

“Proof that Tony Stark has a heart.”

That’s what Pepper had taken the arc reactor to mean. He loved the thought. He loved her fiercely for being the kind of person who would even think it. Because the arc reactor was a machine and...having it made him one, just a bit.

This would change “a bit” to “completely”. Tony’s body would be a machine. No matter how vulnerable his squishy human bits were, Tony had always...

(His mother had called him a romantic before he even knew how to love. Her eyes had sparkled at his upturned nose, refusing to understand romantic love when kisses were icky, and she’d tried to explain the concept of romantic languages, literature, and cities. Of the romance of things. Romance had been his first love)

He’d always believed in being a human, fighting as a human, dying as a human. He’d believed in the permanence.

Humanity was his second love. And he was going to have to give it up.

Helen tweaked his ideas, adding biological elements to it he had never considered (a thousand tiny intricate steps in every single cell and signal), and Rhodey pushed his applications to the limit (ethics, rules, damage control...maybe his mind wasn’t rotting in the army after all). Was he utilizing Extremis to its full extent? What contingencies did he have in the event of an error? In the event of a virus? Does the human brain have enough memory for this kind of thing? What was the processing equivalency?

Still, their final product was volatile. Lab trials had faired unpredictably and, God, Tony was going to adopt every single lab mouse he encountered for the rest of his life to make up for the suffering he had caused (Helen had told him she had ethics approval. That she’s passed this by a board, all very hush hush, tied up in NDAs and old professional relationships, and that they had willingly provided the mice. He still felt cruel, though).

Fact: they didn’t understand how a human mind would assimilate with this kind of technology. What it would do to sense perception, how it would impact self-awareness (people couldn’t stand the sound of their own breathing or blood rushing through their veins, so could Tony stand the
knowledge of nanobots swarming over his bones?).

They found their answer in Vision. He’d shadowed their every movement through Friday, drifting through the compound like a ghost none of the remaining Avengers were strong enough to acknowledge (though Rhod...)

Of course, Vision raised a lot of questions, too. About humanity, personhood, what Tony really thinks about his AI and what they think of him (he’d spent so many late nights with Jarvis, teaching him about everything. About what it was like to have a pet, about the joy unique to stepping out under a blue sky after days of rain, about longing for touch...he hadn’t had those conversations with Friday. He didn’t know how).

It was hard. It was like looking at everything essential to Tony’s life through a twisted funhouse mirror. It was still the same fundamentally. But he could never see it the same way again. It was like looking at the ghost of Jarvis in a completely different entity.

Jarvis was everything essential to Tony’s life anyway, wasn’t he? All wrapped up in a nice bundle of code. Snug as a bug in a programmers rug.

With Vision’s hand on his shoulder, Helen at his back, and Rhod... watching over him with his thousand and one fail-safe protocols, Tony Stark walked through the valley of the shadow of death and he was really fucking afraid.

...He died. He died just like he always did: going up in flames, bringing suffering to everyone who loved him, destroying things he cared about, and, of course, for only a few moments (death never stuck, did it?). And just like before, he came back changed.

Extremis killed his aged body (with every scar he’d ever used as a reminder, every bald spot from burns he had earned, his white hair that promised him an end to all of this some day, and his mother’s brown eyes, fucking Hell, the only piece of him untouched by-). It built him a new one. It also crawled through his chest in a way none of them had ever anticipated, but should have, because Tony was a romantic and could never seem to shake it.

It settled in the crater his mechanical heart had left behind, snuggling up to every poisonous thread of palladium fused to him until death do they part, and sparked arc reactor blue.

Rhod... laughed and, like he was reading Tony’s mind, said the exact goddamn Milton quote Tony used back in the day when Rhod... was coming home after months away (back when he wasn’t afraid of having a heart):

“What is dark within me, illuminate!”
Revisions

Chapter Summary

All work and no play makes Tony a dull boy. Good thing he’s got friends and frenemies, eh?

Extremis changes more than just Tony. He has to take a sabbatical while finishing it. Playing his cards close to his chest was never his style and honesty is the best form of manipulation, so he’d admitted it was for his health. He’d taken an extra week off to make sure he wouldn’t explode and, bizarrely, to learn how to draw fine lines onto his face and to bullshit a “revolutionary health treatment” for Helen to be very hush hush about.

He let people think whatever they wanted to think about his health prior to “Tony Restart” (as the media had taken to calling his “rejuvenation”). Some people assumed he had been dying. Some thought he’d simply gotten plastic surgery and that nothing had been wrong with him. The Accords council ultimately decided to only care that he was in fighting shape, though there was a certain air of distrust around them now that Tony knew he would have to live with.

He was about to make that air both worse and better. He couldn’t keep his new abilities entirely secret, though he also couldn’t reveal the whole truth - no one else was going to handle something as dangerous as Extremis. No one was going to get any ideas.

The reveal of his updated abilities went...well, it went somewhere?? It resulted in Ross gaining back some of the power Tony had been whittling away from him. It also caused new clauses to be added to Accords. It nearly pulled scientists with the “ability to create superpowers” like Helen into the mix, an idea Tony vetoed so hard he nearly accidentally deleted it from digital existence (messing with the Accords archive would be a terrible idea...tempting, but terrible). It forced Tony to fight tooth and claw (because T’Challa joined his cause pretty quickly) for the ability of superhumans to make their own health decisions without the council interfering.

That was too close to owning them. An ugly tepid mixture of slavery and guardianship.

Ugh, sometimes the council was a mess of bad politics and worse opinions in the name of safety. Still: “We cast a shadow on something wherever we stand, and it is no good moving from place to place to save things because the shadow always follows.”. His every move was going to make waves, but he couldn’t avoid moving entirely.

Fucking hell.

In the months following his little reveal, Tony threw himself into revisions. Protections. Considerations of the needs of a dozen different little factors (a spider kid here, a married person there, an alien space intelligence over in the corner - the works). He greased palms, wheedled, begged, irritated, and made the rounds over and over and over again while Vision shadowed his
every movement, keeping a constant eye on any accidental spurts of power or intent from Tony Mark 4’s Extremis powered brain. Eventually, he got in good with his allies, and knew his opponents well enough to give up when the battle was impossible or push through when he could get the slightest bit of leeway.

He should’ve known making allies would fuck his barely stabilized (he was a machine and untested and every so often Extremis did weird shit like getting the cleaning bots to cuddle him at night and-) life.

———

“Mr Stark, you don’t need to be coy with me.”

Kathleen Merkle was saying to him, though he couldn’t figure out why,

“All the changes you’ve been pushing for? All those little revisions? I see what you’re doing - it’s why I’ve been so supportive.”

Merkle has been supportive. Suspiciously so. Tony hadn’t wanted to look a gift horse in the mouth, so now here he was, getting a whole bunch of teeth all up in his business.

“What,”

He started, tilting his sunglasses down his nose so he could fix her with the full force of his bemused stare,

“Exactly am I planning?”

She grinned, an almost childish expression (genuine glee? On a politician? Somebody call the media!) lighting up her features,

“To bring the Rogues back to America! It’s obvious that you’re altering the Accords to meet their interests.”

Tony stared at her, momentarily stunned. Was that what some of his shifter allies thought? That he was bringing a bunch of firepower back to America? Making it the biggest center of superheroes again, giving the American government a stronger foothold in the Accords?

Bringing a powder keg back into his home after it had already exploded once? **Fuck no.** Jesus, what was this lady on????

His incredulity must have shown (everyone who had ever met him knew this was one emotion he was shit at masking), but Merkle moved onwards with her pitch without the slightest acknowledgement. Tony didn’t hear a single word of it other than the,

“Think it over, Mr Stark!”

She tacked onto the end.
The second that the ringing of the other end of the line stopped, Tony snarled out,

"What the shitting Hell is going on!?"

Without even waiting for a "hello" from T'Challa. There was a beat of silence while T'Challa, that conniving politically back-stabbing bastard, carefully considered his response. Tony would bet all of his fortune on the fact that kitty cat was smirking right now. **Fuck.** He'd used Tony's less-than-subtle allusions about the Rogues location against him. Made him out to be a sympathizer. Used his face and name and allies to gather support to get those fuckwits out of his country.

"Well, Mr Stark,"

T'Challa began, pausing for a moment when Tony scoffed,

"Since you knew where they were and didn't arrest them, I figured it was your goal to bring them back to the US peacefully. Was I mistaken?"

**What a dick.** Tony begrudgingly respected him for it. He needs to be smarter in the future about any petty attacks he's going to make on people like T'Challa (*he was going to make more petty attacks. It was in his blood)*.

"Yes."

Tony tells T'Challa, because he hasn't learned his lesson at all about snarking at people without thinking about it first,

"I don't want them back. I hope you're stuck with them forever, ruining your infrastructure and eating you out of house and home, you **dick.**"

There's another moment of silence. T'Challa is clearly startled, though the silence has a certain amused flavour. Tony knows his amused silences. He's full of them. His friends are full of them. That's why Rhodey never laughs at his more bawdy jokes ("That was gross, Tony." *His ass. Rhodey totally thought that impromptu skit with those twins back in the day was hilarious*).

"What about Mr Barnes? You do know where he-"


Tony hung up on him (*it felt pretty good*).
Finally kicking back in his favourite recliner, Tony tried to physically sigh out all of the tensions of the day. He'd accidentally crashed all of his company servers without being able to figure out why. He'd made a light bulb explode. The suit slapped Rhodey's ass, too, though that was somewhat intentional (it was funny, so sue him. It's not like you'd win).

Rhodey limped into the room after him. He pointedly stared at Tony while rubbing his ass grudgingly. The bracers whirred with the strain of supporting his movements all day and made an ugly whining sound when Rhodey pried them from his legs (don't think about, don't think about making a new version, it's stressful for Rhodey to test, don't make the schematics that he could already see in the corner of his vision-), flopping onto the couch next to Tony's recliner.

"Hey there, Honeybear."

Tony murmured, carelessly flapping a hand in Rhodey's general direction while trying to focus his thoughts. He received a grunt in reply and both of them sat there for a few minutes lost in their own heads.

"Hey, Tony?"

Rhodey asked, picking up his legs and shifting them so he could angle himself towards Tony (don't think don't think-),

"Yeah?"

He responded, forcing himself to meet his friend's eyes.

"Do you really not want the Avengers back?"

Rhodey asked, his expression shuttered. Unfortunately for Rhodey, the fire in his eyes was enough for Tony to determine the emotions he was trying to lock down (Rhodey Bear was always pissed. Nobody ever suspected, but boy oh boy was he ever a saltmine). Rhodey was clearly angling for a serious conversation and Tony was too tired to avoid it. He lay there for awhile, mulling over the question.

Did he miss them? Was that the same as wanting them to come back? Was he willing to see them again? To talk to them?

There was a plastic phone somewhere in his bedroom that answered that question.

"Yeah. I don't."

He said, surprised despite himself. Rhodey simply hummed in reply before flapping his hand outwards to meet the one Tony had left outstretched. As he got a good grip on Tony's wrist he squeezed and murmured,

"Here, here. Fuck those guys."
Tony probably shouldn't have been so surprised that Pepper called him that night. As much as he'd like to think that the Avengers weren't what broke them up, as much as he still felt it was his fault (he'd forgotten so many things, important things, and he was always stressing her out), he was too smart to miss a pattern that was slapping him in the face. Well, he did miss patterns he wasn't paying attention to. So there was that. But he did pay attention to Pepper and...

The look on her face whenever he talked about Steve spoke volumes. The ice in her voice when she spoke to Steve, the palpable discomfort when she spoke to the rest of the Avengers, and her avoidance of half of the events they attended painted a pretty clear picture. He mentions as much to her on the phone, once they're finally finished pretending that the call is about business and his health.

In her most private tone, the exhausted and wispy one that she would never ever show at work, Pepper whispers his name and Tony just...soaks it up.

"You always deserved the best, Tony."

She says, and there's pain in the way she says it. Pepper never thought she was good enough at the end. At the end, Pepper always seemed to think good was measured by the things that you did instead of how you did them (she was so good though, so good in every single way that counted, good without having to wipe the slate cleaner than Helen's hands).

"But you never took it. You hurt yourself, they hurt you, and there was rarely someone there when you fell."

The pain in her voice was turning outwards into bitterness. He was glad it wasn't bitterness at herself anymore. Pepper always took good care of herself, so he wasn't surprised that she was already learning to take this pain and turn it into something useful. God, he wished he could be more like her. That he could get better-

"Maybe...maybe you can start getting better now."

She finished, echoing the only truly positive thought he'd had in months. Of course she would. What was positive in his life without Virginia Potts? He tells her as much and she laughs. It's still a sad laugh, though Tony thinks it might mean she missed him. He missed her, too.

"Things are always better when you're around, Ms Potts."

He tells her (and it means so much more than it says on the tin).

"I'll be around, Mr Stark."

She tells him (and it means so much more than anything he could ever hope for).
Phone Tag

Chapter Summary

Tony loves hanging up on T'Challa. He has to call him to do it, though.

Chapter Notes

Woosh, three chapters all in one day. I wanted to put the first arc together pretty quickly so we can move into the meat of the matter AKA Beefy Bucky.

Two months pass by before Tony starts eyeballing his phone again like a particularly cagey cat (the kind the lurks underneath your sofa and tries to murder your feet whenever you place them on the ground). These two months have been spent well. Tony has focused on integrating himself properly with Extremis so he doesn’t ruin his own company by thinking about it too hard while sneezing.

Speaking of his company, he also drags his sad fleshy sack of a body out of politics for awhile (Merkle can’t catch him if he isn’t at an Accords meeting!) to focus on it. Things hadn’t fared well in his absence – Pepper had lines on her face that had never been there before. He would know; he’s memorized every line on Pepper’s face because he loves them all (he tells her as much, though she doesn’t believe him. He misses his wrinkles).

Speaking of things not faring well - Peter had been stirring up trouble hither and thither, the little shit. The reports Happy had been cataloguing for him during his recovery period were illuminating (he tapped the centre of his glowing chest and suppressed a laugh. Rhodey side-eyed him as he continued with his PT routine). Honestly, Tony had no idea how the kid had managed to send himself through no less than four glass windows, let alone how he acquired more than one low-life nemesis, or how he had managed to nearly drown in his principal’s pool.

He’d nearly had a heart attack (not that that was possible now…was it? He should call Helen. Helen would know) when he finally finished reading the stack of reports. He’d chilled out alright though by the time he labeled it: “proof that children are not to be trusted with their own wellbeing” (Rhodey had scratched out “children” and replaced it with “Starks” and Tony refused to think about it any more than strictly necessary). Of course, by chilled out alright he really meant “had managed to be cool about things for a few days before finally spiralling into guilt-fuelled panic”.

Some time for reflection followed that (dozens of rant sessions with Rhodey and Vision were reflection, right?). He’d also complained to Helen…oh, and he’d made some appointments with therapists who knew how to keep their mouths shut. That had been…helpful(ish). He hated the first few people who tried to counsel him. The most qualified of them all was just a big bag of dicks who wanted Tony to confront his hypersexuality from his youth instead of the relevant problems of today (god, why would he ever want to talk about that, anyway? The guy probably wanted to publish about the sex lives of high-profile child abuse victims. Gross, Freud 2.0 was gross).
Tony’s shiny new therapist (the one who survived, anyway) was capable of making a therapy session into an enlightening conversation. She was old as sin, but her memory was sharp and she knew everything about everything (she had laughed when he told her that and then she made a bunch of cryptic statements about being magic. Tony was slightly worried that they weren’t a joke). She liked to drive his feelings of guilt into conversations about ethics and law and the limitations of man and machine (she read Asimov! “Never let your sense of morals get in the way of doing what’s right” had rolled off her tongue like she’d said it a thousand times before). As much as he enjoyed talking to her, it lead to his current predicament with the phone.

You see, they’d talked over the treatment of individuals like Peter in the Accords. Then they’d talked about why minors needed to be treated differently under the law. Then they’d had a long conversation about autonomy and how it could be enshrined in policy while respecting the will of the greater public as somewhat ‘autonomous’. It had sparked a debate about minors recruited into organizations like Hydra, who showed a tendency to kidnap and indoctrinate. It was a legal SNAFU even before they’d begun to discuss brainwashing. Even that was pennies in comparison to the issue of international law’s approach to crimes committed while brainwashed on a large scale. Right in the middle of an impassioned speech about protecting the rights and interests of vulnerable persons at the expense of a larger concept of justice, Tony realized they were talking about Barnes.

They’d always been talking about Barnes, hadn’t they? The case of Bucky Barnes (he was gonna slap a trademark on that if he thought it one more time) was irritatingly relevant to everything he hadn’t accomplished yet with the new series of superhero laws.

Barnes’ actions had occurred on such a large scale and such a long period of time that it would be impossible for him to NOT face any legal consequences. American law would protect him, but countries who had lost entire governments to Hydra’s fist would not be so kind. They couldn’t afford to be – not when their history had been irrevocably changed and people were still hurting.

Tony was pissed to all Hell and back that he couldn’t ignore this. He was angry that his therapist had led him to it, even though it was his own hands on the wheel and his own feet on the gas pedal (he had driven straight towards the topic of Barnes without even noticing. How long had he been doing that? How many conversations had he unthinkingly had about Barnes?).

Tony didn’t want the Avengers back, so of course he’d be doomed to pave their way home. **Predictable.**

With that thought still hovering sourly in the back of his mind, Tony snatches up the phone and dialed T’Challa’s super fancy private number. Angrily, he used Friday to bypass the usual hold procedures while the Dora’s tracked his call, and tapped his foot waiting for T’Challa to answer.

Without even a hello, Tony dumped all of his thoughts on The Matter of Bucky Barnes™ in Tabby Catta’s lap and hung up.

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Another month of avoiding his kittyness later, Tony did it again (he could hear one of the Doras screaming in frustration in the background. It made him feel a little bit better).

A week later, Tony did it again, though this time his frustration must’ve been palpable because
T’Challa didn’t even try to yell at him. How the hell do you legally protect someone embedded with trigger words? How does that even work???? T’Challa tried to respond, probably with some actual knowledge about international law and policy, but Tony hung up on him again.

This time T’Challa called back, however, Tony didn’t pick up. He had some workshopping to do.

(Back in Wakanda, T’Challa whipped his cellphone at the wall. He watched in petty satisfaction as Shuri stomped on it and quietly seethed about Tony Stark’s shitty attitude)

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Helen and Vision frowned out from their respective conference call screens as Tony and Rhodey poked at the specs for BARF. Dozens of glittering projections displayed every aspect of the machine. Tony manipulated them with hardly a thought as his co-conspirators asked to see this or that.

They’d been at it for hours before Rhodey finally turned away from the specs and pinched the bridge of his nose. Gently, Tony massaged the back of Rhodey’s head, knowing that the tension in his back gave him migraines and a sore scalp.

“This is retraumatizing.”

Rhodey points out, a heavy frown on his face. The braces make a high-pitch whining noise as they adjust to his muscle tension (Tony wondered sometimes if the bracers spoke a language of their own. They revealed so much about Rhodey’s emotional state to him). Tony stared at them for a moment, trying to get himself to focus on what Rhodey had just said (Extremis would never work on somebody like Rhodey. Human, good, not so willing to throw that away).

“He has a point.”

Helen replied, filling in Tony’s silence as subtly as she could (he didn’t deserve Helen Cho. She was a godsend). Her and Rhodey were right, of course. The ethics of using BARF for something like this were dubious at best. It was a great tool for dealing with small and particularly damaging memories, allowing people to relearn an interaction like a child would (in fact, Tony was suddenly stricken with several applications for children, though he’d have to discuss them with someone later). 70 years of trauma and torture wasn’t something that could be relived without severe consequences.

“I’m a little bit worried…”

Helen began, shifting Tony out of the emails he’d been drafting in his brain,

“Changing memories like this…instead of removing brainwashing, it could just as easily be used to apply it.”

A wave of nausea hit Tony strongly enough that his knees buckled. Rhodey’s bracers whined like a dog whistle, making him reach out a comforting hand to Rhodey’s shoulder before he could even think about it. Out of the corner of his rapidly tunnelling vision, he could see Vision working through the BARF specs on his end, scribbling in potential failsafes, inserting parameters for emotional stress tolerance, drafting up a new patent even more ironclad that the one Tony had already published.
Shuddering, Tony turned the conversation away from BARF as anything more than a last resort possibility. If they ever used it, it would have to be tailored specifically towards someone LIKE Barnes. If it ever came down to it being necessary, that is. Because Tony wasn’t using it on Barnes. He wasn’t helping him. He wasn’t.

As 4 am creeps up on all of them, Rhodey’s bracers groan, long and low, and Tony forces Rhodey to put his legs up so he could loosen them. He pats the machinery like a particularly beloved family pet and Rhodey stares at him. Butterfingers wheels up, jealous of Tony petting something else, and bumps the loosened bracers to the floor while Tony sighs.

“That’s funny…”

Rhodey says. Tony immediately knows what he means. Any scientist worth their salt would (because they’d said exactly that at least once before). He and Helen both stare at him in anticipation while Vision’s gaze flits between the three of them in confusion.

“You understand the bots even though they don’t use any human language. You understand their ‘words’ even though you don’t speak them.”

Rhodey is speaking slowly, like he’s testing the truth of each word before they leave his mouth.

“You even understand the noises from the bracers. What if…”

Tony loved this moment. He’d loved it in MIT, too. Rhodey’s eyes would light up with a discovery and his hands would jerk, seeking out a pen, as something totally novel embedded itself in his mind. Tony used to drive him to this point all of the time with wild inquiries and fire-breathing toasters (Rhodey’s materials and engineering project had been on a flame-retardant transparent skin. He’d used it to coat their kitchen, though his supervisor never knew that).

“You can give an English meaning to nonsense. What if you could give a nonsense meaning to an English word? Or any word? What if you could make it mean something else? Form a different association, or no association at all?”

Rhodey was speaking faster now, his fingers twitching for a pen and Tony was incredibly amused to see Helen’s hands moving, too. The amusement quickly faded in the face of excitement as he realized what exactly Rhodey was going for.

“Like when somebody has a stroke and forgets an entire language!”

He cries out, right as Helen pipes in with,

“But only a few select words! Kill the meaning of the triggers – of course, you’d have to take away any language association the victim has, which means you’d take away their entire vocabulary of that word—”

“But,”

Rhodey cuts in,
“It’s worth it, especially if the words aren’t that common or can simply be replaced with something else!”

Tony’s brain immediately focused on a series of random Russian words, easily forgotten, easily replaced. This method (“A scrambler!” Rhodey cries out as Helen enthusiastically claps and Vision finally catches up to their wonderful discovery) could help Barnes. Which he isn’t doing, obviously.

He’s not.

Extremis allows him to construct an implant tinier than anything he ever could’ve made by hand or machining alone. It’s elegant. It’s intricate. It communicates a linguistic response mismatched with certain trigger words while also sending out a disruptive frequency to the auditory centre of the brain in response to those words. He’s managed to make it work with thousands of different voices and tones, all thanks to a collection of very enthusiastic linguists in Germany (he’s going to revolutionize their understanding of language development and loss).

The implant is a work of art. It needs to be tested for purposes other than linguistic research, though. So he sends it to T’Challa.

“Still don’t want them back?”

Rhodey asks, lounging on the rooftop and gazing at stars with Tony. Tony needed company to do that - looking at them alone wasn’t his favorite activity anymore. He avoided telescopes like the plague.

“Fuck no.”

Tony responds emphatically, tossing a pebble over the edge of the roof. He hopes it makes it far enough to clatter against the rocks in Vision’s zen garden. He saw him wandering around out there earlier.

“Good. Cause they’re gonna be coming back, but it doesn’t mean they get to come back into your heart.”

Rhodey grumbles. More than anything, Tony wants to deflect. The urge nearly strangles him with its intensity. Extremis is good for distractions, though, so he focuses on his nanobots and smothers his anxiety. Chuckling, he taps his softly glowing chest,

“What is dark within me…”

He starts, smiling when he catches Rhodey’s eyes glittering with mirth in the starlight,
They both shout into the darkness, keeling over with laughter as every light in the compound flashes at once, throwing a very startled Vision into high relief. For the first time in awhile, Tony thinks it's good to be alive.
T’Challa gets his revenge on Tony, Tony acquires a unique kind of stalker, and the Avengers debate continues going to Hell in a handbasket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With renewed vigor, Tony throws himself back into politics, thinly veiled hysteria bubbling up in the back of his mind and making his cellphone do some really wacky stuff (he pities it and promises an upgrade in the near future). Friday, his best girl even though he had kindof cut her out during his Extremis training, covers it all up and sweeps it under the rug. Hell, she even conceals the time Tony, in a fit of pique, made every single coffee machine in every single building within a 5 mile radius burn the coffee they were preparing. She made it look like a power surge – his little girl was clever as they came.

Senators and diplomats of every kind ride his ass like there’s no tomorrow. They want to know about the Rogues (“The Avengers” again now that people like them after what, a year? Public memory was so short). Public opinion in the States is beginning to urge for their return, if only to face trial, though not by a lot. Just enough to be noticed.

People want to feel safe again. He can’t really begrudge them that (except he kindof does. His therapist says that that’s ok, but he still feels like a shitty person). Tony doesn’t take any joy in rebuffing each new politician that tries to speak to him.

T’Challs calls. And calls. And…keeps on calling, actually. It’s pretty annoying if Tony is being honest. Sure Friday screens his calls, but T’Challa keeps calling from different numbers and locations, so Tony has to look through the call logs himself to make sure that it’s actually T’Challa. He also has to turn his attention to Wakanda to make sure T’Challa isn’t actually dying or something.

Tony drops every single call, so it’s really not surprising that T’Challa corners him after an Accords council meeting.

“Mr Barnes send his…”

Is all T’Challa gets out before Tony announces,

“Nãope.”

And flees the room, knocking over his chair in his rush (so starts T’Challa’s revenge for Tony)
“Mr Barnes would like to-“

T’Challa says, before Tony interrupts him with a single,

“No.”

“Mr Barnes-“

“NO!”

“He’s really inter-“

“NO!!!!!!!!!”

Random gifts from Wakanda start appearing on Tony’s doorstep. He has the most uncomfortable feeling that they haven’t been picked out by T’Challa.

1) T’Challa doesn’t like him, judging by the glimmer of absolute delight in his eyes whenever Tony runs away.

2) T’Challa is a rich man with a lot of pride. There’s no way he’d pick out anything this unrefined.

3) T’Challa, as one rich man to another, would definitely slap his name onto these gifts or at least onto a card.

4) Some of the gifts are vaguely threatening and Tony thinks he could probably get a restraining order on T’Challa for this??? Which would be counter-productive to T’Challa’s plans, therefore these aren’t from him.

All of the gifts are weird. None of them are something Tony would actually like. It’s actually kindof comforting that he doesn’t like them, beyond a generic “ah that’s nice” at some very well-made cold porcelain flowers or the occasional impressed hum at a tiny robot figurine. If his creepy gift stalker
actually knew what Tony liked, that would make them a regular stalker instead of just the gift kind, so yeah, he's grateful they keep missing their mark.

Tony begins to very very VERY awkwardly give them all away. They come with enough frequency (sometimes twice a day) that they are building up and Tony is beginning to sense a pattern in their selection that he really REALLY does not want to. He feels distinctly like he has fed a neighbourhood stray cat and it has begun leaving dead mice on his doorstep. Which, all things considered (there had been knives in the last package. Knives!!!!!!!), was genuinely hysterical.

Tony tells this to Rhodey. He agrees, it’s pretty funny (the knives were Hello Kitty kitchen knives sharper than anything Tony had ever seen. They fit the whole cat analogy well). Vision doesn’t get it, but they’re working on his sense of humour. Absurdism still escapes him.

Tony organizes the signing, approval, and introduction of a new team of 10 people before the whispers of the Rogues impending return become less “whispers” and more of an “openly discussed idea” at council meetings. He’s really been racing against the clock to expand his collection of new heroes.

By the time he’s managed to wrap Jan, Luke, Jessica, Peter, Matt, and several others completely into the initiative, installing them with travel to and from the compound, rooms if they wanted them (he knew that Jessica didn’t like the rent she currently paid and that her heating was shit), and regular team training schedules, the gifts from Wakanda had started to taper off. Disturbingly, once he started getting once a week gifts instead of twice a day, they were closer to his own tastes.

Tony thought he would feel relieved, but honestly the reduction in gifts is just threatening. A storm is gathering on the horizon (“When shall we three meet again…” levels of threatening).

Burying the anxiety that keeps trying to sneak up on him (he liked to imagine himself finding it under the bed and being all like “gotcha!” before sending it away. His therapist says humour helps. She took it better than his hang up on Phoenix analogies), Tony turns his attention to Rhodey’s little side project. Rhodey has managed to pick up a kid with anger issues the size of the moon and ice powers. His name is Donny and Tony is actually a little afraid of his pre-teen angst. Tony’s new laws about minors and coercion of superhuman individuals (coercion is bad! Don’t coerce minors! He can’t believe he had to shove that into international law) saves the kid’s ass (he froze his school…twice) and gets him a new place to practice controlling his powers.

Tony calls Donny’s introduction to the compound "training" in front of the council, but everybody knows it’s really just babysitting. The kid doesn’t have any living relatives and Tony is a soft touch. Rhodey is even softer.

Donny winds up setting an example for how things are gonna be run around here. More and more unhappy wayward children start showing up on Tony’s doorstep (Jessica and Luke bitch about it, however Tony has seen them dishing out life advice like nobody else, so they can stuff it). Soon his gaggle of children includes mostly-content-with-life Kamala Khan and entirely-pissed-off-with-life RiRi Williams. Hysterically, the two of them like each other. Even more hysterically, their families like Tony.
Clearly there is something wrong with them. Who would ever want Tony basically raising their-

Tony abruptly shoots up from the bed he’s been sharing with Rhodey (now that Rhodey was back full time, old habits had started creeping out of the woodwork. Don’t judge).

“Rhodey!!”

He shrieks, shaking his friend,

“Rhodey!!! Holy shit?!?!?!? Are we...are we PARENTS!?”

He screams the same thing at Vision when he phases into the room, concern etched onto his face, and Rhodey laughs so hard he actually starts wretching and falls out of the bed. Tears stream down his face as Tony continues his freak out (Vision laughs, just a little, so maybe absurdism isn’t lost on him after all).

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The push to “bring the Avengers home” (a campaign he will never EVER refer to by name outside of the confines of his brain) is becoming a public issue. Citizens are constantly being polled by news agencies, but various states disagree.

California in particular is fucking furious at the idea of Americans turning away from the United Nations again, especially through violating foreign borders and smashing entire cities to bits. California, as a state, is still pretty bitter about losing most of their foreign workforce to the new president’s nationalistic policies, and its clear the anger from that is fuelling the Avengers debate. Of course, a large chunk of California just wants to separate from the state entirely, so they take a pro-Avengers stance because that’s political disagreement for you.

Texas is also pretty pissed. They are absolutely seething over the avoidance of military oversight, the refusal to obey a chain of command, and Wanda’s escape. Most of the Southern states are mad about Wanda in some shape or form (big shocker there, reeeeeeal big).

The squabbling intensifies as New York, a pro-Avengers state, tries constantly to get Tony to state his opinion. He’s a Californian at heart, and they know that, so California begins riding his ass, too. He blithely refuses to say anything, stating that his stance on the Accords is perfectly clear through his actions and, as a member of the governing council, it would be ridiculous for him to bring his own biases to the floor of an international issue. It’s all bullshit and they all know it, but nobody can make Tony Stark do something he doesn’t want to (also bullshit, though this is bullshit he needs to believe).

Eventually, the childishness gets to him and he finally concedes to an interview. There, he threateningly asks if America thinks it should completely ignore the rights and freedoms of other countries directly impacted by the Rogues escape. Nobody seems to care as much about foreign policy as they should these days, but framing his words as a question of independence and ethics stops some people in their tracks.

However, it doesn’t stop everyone, so in his abject despair Tony starts spending more and more time pulling in various pedagogy researchers to discuss how to create a normal curriculum for supers from
abnormal backgrounds. He gets a whole pile of therapists, social workers, and professors involved in creating the closest approximation of a normal life for these kids that they can. It’s a thinly veiled attempt to trick a bunch of professionals into setting up an organization to protect super kids, but hey, it works.

“It’s much better to do good in a way that no one knows anything about.” Right? Maybe Tolstoy had more points than Tony ever wanted to give to him. He’d never enjoyed the man’s opinions on family as an institution, but he had Tony here.

At least that’s one weight off his back. Tony can’t screw up an organization he’s not a member of AND nobody can try to rip it apart because of him either. Score!

(There’s a package of Wakandan coffee on his doorstep when he gets home and the feeling of victory drains away. Maybe if he ignores the coffee, he won’t ever drink it. If he never drinks it, he’ll never like it. And if he never likes it, maybe his stalker will go away)

(…)

(The coffee is delicious, damn it)

Chapter End Notes

Bucky has finally begun to make his presence known! He’s pretty determined to say thank you, but he quickly realizes he has no idea what Tony likes. This leads to a research phase that makes literally everybody uncomfortable. T’Challa enters a room, sees like a thousand photos of Tony, and promptly leaves. He’s not dealing with this.
Chapter Summary

Politics free the Rogues from the clutches of accountability, Tony feels greasy, and kids don't understand politicians. Also, the robot gang discusses robot feelings in the most roundabout way possible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Exhaustion. That was the word of the day. Tony was filled to the brim with exhaustion. He would absolutely love to take a step back and maybe, just maybe, jam his head in the sand like a cartoon ostrich, but life would kick his ass for it. “He who looks from the outside through a window open never sees as much as he who looks through a window closed” (ugh, French poetry) and all that – his imagination would eat him alive worse than reality ever could.

“Bring Home the Avengers” (all capitalized and official now!) was quickly becoming the most hotly debated topic internationally since the height of WWII. Tony hated it. He was tired of it. However, things were beginning to spiral out of control. The German foreign minister had called on him two days ago to make an official statement with Rhodey and Vision as the heads of the New Avengers. He had to make his stance known.

His real stance was “toss everybody in jail so Tony never had to see them again”. Unfortunately, that wasn’t going to fly (Tony could fly, though. Preferably to a foreign country never to be seen again).

Everybody finds out about Tony’s “official statement” even though he hasn’t made it yet. Or agreed to it. Or said much of anything about it. Kathleen Merkle calls him twice before Friday decides to deal with her calls herself (as Tony’s young and incompetent secretary, how hilarious).

T’Challa calls too, and, in a fit of pettiness, Tony makes him listen to the entire meow mix theme on hold before finally answering.

“It’s not about Mr Barnes so don’t hang up-“

T’Challa cries out in a single breath (huh, maybe hanging up on him so many times in the row had given his highness a complex).

“You know they are coming home-“

T’Challa is interrupted by Tony’s noise of discontent, but he soldiers on regardless.

“I know it, too. I paved the way for this and you are allowed-“

A louder noise of discontent,

“To resent me and distrust me, but I would like to lend you my diplomatic experience.”
Tony would love to jam his head in the sand. He would also love to just not have a phone anymore, considering that the only people who used it were annoying. If he stuck with the shitty French poetry though; “I know that suffering is the sole nobility, Which earth and hell shall never mar”. People were tired of being scared, they had declared what they wanted, and he owed it to them even if he really REALLY didn’t want to.

Tony and T’Challa craft a joint statement prioritizing the well-being of victims of circumstance and trauma. Their statement does not explicitly state who they are referring to. Tony knows T’Challa is leaning on using it to help Steve get some mercy from the courts. T’Challa knows Tony is using it for Bucky (even if he really REALLY isn’t). The statement reminds the world of the law, of misdeeds done, but also of the failings of General Ross in the capture because Tony wanted to deliver the killing blow (and if it helped get the Rogues back, fuck, so be it).

Ultimately, their statement concludes that any legal action taken cannot only address the past, not when the Accords have changed so thoroughly, but must be shaped towards creating a better future for citizens of the world and the super powered individuals amongst them. It implies that the Rogues should come back to the States and be allowed to sign the Accords with not much more than increased oversight on their part.

It slides off of Tony’s tongue like slime (HE thinks that past action is more than enough to warrant jail time, god, even a YEAR of jail time).

T’Challa tries to call him (that man was really beginning to feel like a cat scratching at his door every fucking time it closes) after the press conference. This time Tony lets the phone ring out of something other than petty disregard. He feels sick. He feels like the Merchant of Death and Howard’s doormat and every shady character he had struggled to distance himself from for years. God, he wasn’t suited to being a politician (he was having a panic attack, where was Rhodey, where was Vision, he didn’t want the kids to see what a hypocrite-).

An anonymous essay about Tony’s dedication to “a better world” is published online. The research is disturbingly thorough and traced back to interviews Tony had taken part in as a child. Bright eyed, gap toothed, and holding Jarvis’ hand he had promised to make a dish that kept food fresh forever. He had wanted to make a kitchen helper bot, but Jarvis had joked about being put out of the job (Tony had just wanted to help but even back then all of his ideas hurt).

Upon publication, the gifts from Wakanda stopped. It made a shiver pass down Tony’s spine (it felt like there were eyes firmly pointed at the back of his head). He would’ve preferred odds and ends to…this.
He doesn’t read the essay. Friday does, though. He knows she does even if he won’t ask (he doesn’t speak to Friday much lately). Nobody else would write a letter to editor rebuffing a section about Tony’s attachment to the kitchen staff and his interest in children’s affairs as a symptom of something greater. Well, Rhodey would, but he wouldn’t have been able to bury anybody in references and snark quite that quickly.

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Bucky Barnes is pardoned first. Tony’s word holds a lot of sway and the courts know Bucky can only be triggered in the standard sense now. None of the average folk out there know about the trigger words or anything Tony had had to do with it. None of the average folk know anything.

Bucky’s pardon makes international news, though Bucky never comes forward for an interview. Somehow it just makes people love him more. Nobody trusted him in the first place, so his redemption was escaping skepticism for now.

Rhodey and Tony take the kids out for laser tag while Vision keeps them updated on the news. No one else was willing to watch the announcement they knew was coming. A tiny update blipped into Tony’s mind right as Rhodey’s phone buzzed and they both shot Peter from around a corner. Spidey senses didn’t work on things that weren’t a danger.

Ah.

The update.

The Avengers (backstabbers, liars, people who couldn’t trust-) would be returning in a month. Hoooooooray.

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Even through the darkest depths of his depression and Extremis going on the fritz again (his chest hurt, so it tried to heal itself even though there wasn’t any real damage. It was turning him into a goddamn flashlight), Tony still managed to be surprised at sheer scale of RiRi’s wrath. She hadn’t taken the news of the returning Rogues all that well.

RiRi’s usual cynicism was directed towards the police, the government, and the military, so Tony wasn’t expecting her to be furious about this. He’s totally bewildered. He tries his hand at figuring out what’s going on in her teenage mind (i.e. plies her with offers of hot chocolate and inventing), however RiRi snaps at him pretty quickly. Then she runs off before he can even figure out how to respond to her calling him “Benjamin Button Garbage” and Kamala follows close behind her.

His not-kids (not-his kids?) have run away. Great. At least he can track them with Extremis instead of his terrible parenting skills.

He’s sitting in the kitchen watching footage of them behind his eyelids when RiRi’s mom places a mug of hot chocolate in front of him. His own tactics are being used against him. They probably won’t work – everything tastes like nothing right now. He sucks at being hungry when he gets like
“She’s afraid they’ll kill you.”

RiRi’s mom (she had refused to give him her name after the first he’d accidentally called her mom. He was an embarrassment) tells him with absolutely no segway, “Petty criminals go to jail, but people who abuse their power over millions get a press conference. RiRi doesn’t know what that means. It scares her.”

Sometimes Tony forgot RiRi was just a scrappy teen. She was so brilliant and so full of emotion that it was hard for him to remind himself that there were thousands of things she didn’t know.

“RiRi doesn’t understand people. She doesn’t get society. She loves the world, she loves people as a concept, but when she’s faced with their irrationality, she struggles y’know? You earned her trust, so the fact that you supported the return of those people is...conflicting with her truths. She doesn’t understand that you HAVE to.”

RiRi’s mom was basically handing him the handbook on her daughter and he had no idea what to do with it. Hell, he didn’t even really get what she was saying. Tony buries his face in his hands and whispers, “Am I setting a bad example? Should I talk to her? I can’t really explain...”

His not-kid’s mother (god, what was her name???? He felt creepy looking it up, but at this rate he was going to have to) gestured for him to continue and he ground his teeth in frustration, “I have a hard time with people sometimes, too. More than is normal? I was taught how to talk to people, but it isn’t, it’s not natural sometimes? Manipulation is easy, but emotions are…”

She pats him on the back in sympathy, a wry grin on her lips, “She likes you as much as she does partially because you struggle with people other than her. You don’t make her feel weird. Besides, she doesn’t understand emotions other than simmering hatred and idol worship that well anyway.”

Tony feels weirdly parented. It’s actually a little distressing. When he tells her this, she laughs (women always laugh at him when he’s honest lately).

RiRi comes home late that night and won’t look him over dinner, so Donny smirks at her and quickly sets about enjoying all of Tony’s attention. Kamala looks a bit like she might cry, but her parents and brother have that covered so Tony isn’t too worried. Lies, he is extremely worried but also has expressed too much emotion today. It’s weird and awful and he’d like to stop. Besides, none of them are mad at Rhodey, so he can help deal with it.

Eventually Donny gets Tony to show him some of the things he’s been teaching Dum-E lately (he’s learning how to play a modified Otomatone) and RiRi grinds her teeth so hard that Tony is worried she’ll crack them. Extremis will replace his teeth, but RiRi can’t fix hers. He awkwardly turns
towards her to make her stop, but she delivers a swift kick to both his and Donny’s shins on her way out of the room.

He chooses to take it as a sign of forgiveness. Her mother is rubbing at her temples, so he’s probably right.

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Days pass, but they don’t get any brighter. Things feel a little bit empty. Tony feels a little bit empty.

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The night is brisk to a point Vision understands as uncomfortable for average humans. It’s supposed to get even colder, so when he discovers Tony on the roof of the compound he decides to go talk to him.

He’s sitting near the edge in a poor-quality plastic lawn chair. In his hand is a glass made entirely out of ice (Donny’s work?). It glitters the first rays of dawn and illuminates Tony’s exhausted face (though Extremis hides any swelling or discolouration sleeplessness would usually produce, Vision can decipher the dullness of his expression).

Tony is drinking alone, though it can’t possibly be alcohol (Jess had been guarding the liquor from Luke lately. Tony had asked her to do the same for him despite barely touching a drop in a year).

The sparkling fizzy scent of ginger ale reaches Vision’s nose as he approaches. There’s a little umbrella in Tony’s drink (Vision smiles – he’s getting a good grip on absurdism at this point).

“Want some?”

Tony asks, because as of a few months ago Tony always asks. Vision doesn’t need food or drink, but he’s…curious. Being alive was such an interesting thing. He accepts the drinks and enjoys the strangely charming sensation of bubbles bursting in his mouth. He holds them there for awhile, allowing them to tickle his tongue until he feels like he needs to sneeze.

Tony waits for him to be finished before lifting a single eyebrow in question. It floats just over the rim of the sunglasses he’s wearing (at dawn, when it’s still dark).

“Where will the Rogues be staying?”

Vision asks (he never minced words, had never seen the point). He settles himself on the ground next to Tony’s lawn chair. Above him, he hears a groan and the sound of Tony tossing back another mouthful of his ginger ale violently. When Vision peers up at him, Tony rubs his temples with ice-cooled hands.

“In the west end of the compound. The old buildings. Y’know, the ones from before the renovations
for the New Avengers. They’ll share a training facility with us because I’m not building anything for them, but they won’t sleep or eat within a kilometer of the kids. I won’t let them in the school either.”

Tony’s tone is thick with frustration and exhaustion. His fingers twitch on his ice glass, splashing little droplets all over the ground. Vision wonders if Tony sometimes uses Extremis to hide the biological cues he’s aware of, like sweating or a quavering voice. He wonders if Tony ever noticed that his fingers tremble from stress.

He doesn’t voice his thoughts. Instead, he stays quiet and waits for Tony to say everything else on his mind. He remembers flashes about something like this from before: when he used to wait in silence for Tony to gather up what he wanted to say (before Vision had a body that could reach out and comfort him).

"I’m scared."

Tony said, leaving the sunglasses on.

“I’m scared everyone will realize I’m a waste of their time.”

The trembling of his hand stopped when his eyes flicked to it.

“I’m scared that the kids won’t want me anymore. I’m scared that they will. I’m scared of absolutely everything right now.”

Vision leans his head against Tony’s thigh, still waiting as Tony rips off the sunglasses and throws them off the roof. They land in the zen garden with a spray of gravel.

"I’m scared that I’ll take one look at Steve and find myself loving him again. I’m terrified of the idea that I’ll look at him and feel nothing because I’m actually empty now and whatever I called a heart doesn’t exist anymore. I don’t want to deal with him and I don’t want anyone I love to deal with him.”

Tony is crying, great angry heaves, and he wipes furiously at his eyes, scraping the skin until Extremis sparks and lights him up.

"I’m not a person anymore! He never thought I was good to begin with and now I’m not even, fuck, I’m not even human! I’ve changed myself and I threw that away and I can never get it back but HE is still human!!”

The glow of Extremis in Tony’s chest is almost bright enough to blind. It made his skin look paper thin and pale blue. Sometimes it made him look too much like a corpse for Vision’s peace of mind.

“It’s just another way I’ll never measure up and I don’t even know why I care or why it’s always about him! Everything is, fuck, fucking hell, everything is always about him. Howard made sure that even if I wiped away everything else,”

Tony violently raked a hand down his own chest, over the light that persisted there no matter what,

“...I would never be able to get rid of that.”

Vision slides his hand around Tony’s wrist and steals another swallow of his drink. It’s still fizzy and good. Some things in this world are immutable.
Tony stares at him for a second before cracking a lopsided miserable grin.

“Finally growing a sense of humour, Vis? Your timing is terrible.”

He murmurs, sniffling despite the tiny uptick of his lips.

“I can’t make your childhood any better. I can’t make Captain Rogers go away. I can’t make you any promises about people who aren’t me and you already know I won’t leave you.”

Vision says, flat but not unkind,

“All I can do is make you feel a little more...human.”

He tries on a smile himself, awkward and uncomfortable, but still real.

“I’m not very good at it yet, though, so if you want comfort, I suppose you’ll have to teach me.”

It isn’t enough in a lot of ways. Vision knows that. But it’s enough to remind Tony that there’s a fundamental difference between himself and Vision. That there’s still a line between himself and a machine, that there are lines that blur there and produce people like Vision or people like him. Vision doesn’t want to be human, but he’s still...something.

Friday’s voice floats up from Tony’s pocket (Tony’s eyes squeeze shut and he grows unnaturally still. Vision wishes he wouldn’t use Extremis like this). Tony has been ignoring her in a way and he clearly feels some guilt over it. Vision understands though – he’s difficult for Tony to deal with in this new form, so it’s no surprise Friday is even harder.

“Boss is the best at teaching people to be people.”

She says, something akin to pride in her voice,

“The kiddies still think that there’s a lady in a booth running this whole facility. I crank called T’Challa yesterday and they all thought I was a real person.”

When Tony starts laughing helplessly, gently caressing his phone and reaching down to grip Vision’s hand, Vision notes the slightest waver of uncertainty in her voice,

“Humour helps, right Boss?”

The sun lights up the rooftop, casting Tony’s too-blue skin in golden light, and he rubs his thumb over his phone again.

“Yeah Friday, it does.”

He whispers,

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes
French poetry here is Baudelaire! I love Baudelaire, but I get the distinct impression Tony would have a love hate relationship with his prose. On one hand, Tony is a drama queen. He loves those death metaphors! On the other hand, he would probably want Baudelaire to not sound like such a smug dick half the time.

Also I'm super bitter about not knowing RiRi's mom's name. I know RiRi's run will probably continue to betray me by underselling this woman after giving her such a strong introduction.
Shadows

Chapter Summary

The power of positivity doesn't make literally meeting ones demons much easier, local man is outraged to discover.

As much as Tony wishes the world was a fairytale (or maybe a legend of old like the ones Rhodey buys every year for his birthday), it’s not. The atmosphere in the compound sinks lower every day despite everyone’s efforts to stay positive. It seeps into Tony like poison and then through him until he poisons everyone else.

The Rogues are coming back. It’s stressful as all Hell.

Movers are everywhere, constantly preparing the West compound to be livable (why the US only gave Tony a month to prep was beyond him. Oh here you go Mr Billionaire, make space for the people who stabbed you in the back! Get all their accommodations ready within a month! It’ll be easy! Fuck off). Patrolling government officials interrupt his daily life near-constantly. They get underfoot for everybody else too, like cockroaches.

The stress crawls up Tony’s throat and out of his fingertips. He needs to do something or he’ll lose himself in the compound’s surveillance systems or in digging as deep into the Pentagon as he can for putting him in this situation.

Quietly, against his better judgment, Tony starts making designs for Bucky Barnes’ room. Extremis makes all his ideas come to life, whether he intends to put them to paper or not (that was just an excuse. Plenty of weapons flitted through his head and never went into full schematics). He bases it off of the apartment in Romania that Barnes had settled in the longest (3 months and 2 days before Rogers had broken down his door).

Multiple complex routes of escape (a window leading to a corner of the building that somebody like Barnes could get a handhold on, a weak point below the window that could buckle under foot just enough to grip, facing the back of the compound and into protected land). Only one true entry point.

Thick walls that muffled sound and could provide support in the event of disaster. A heavy military-grade door. Extremely little furniture (a bed, a chair, a tiny desk).

Thick plush carpeting (to muffle footsteps or to simply press his feet into?).

A space under the bed. A depression to the side of the closet door where a person could hide. A steam trunk large enough to hide a body.

Tony paints the walls arc reactor blue and stains the wood floor under the navy carpet the exact shade of his mother’s eyes. He polishes the floor until it shines.

Then, after wallowing in self-loathing for a few days, he calls his therapist about projecting and how to make it go the fuck away.
“Your coping methods have only been beneficial to both yourself and Mr Barnes so far, Tony.”

She tells him, much more to the point than usual (though Tony usually wasn’t so direct with his problems either…oh, was she mimicking his reactions? Ugh, no, he didn’t like being aware of that).

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

She says. Tony doesn’t want this to be nothing to worry about. He’s built his mother’s murderer a room and painted it in his colours. He tells her about his plans to build Bucky a hidden room and her only reaction is to ask if that will calm him down or if it’s pushing his boundaries to be this deep in Barnes’ psyche.

It is. Pushing his boundaries that is. Thinking about what Barnes would want in a hidden room is the same as thinking about what Barnes wants to hide.

She tells him to stop. So, he makes a sunken floor under the bed instead. A hidden compartment instead of a hidden room (he’s proud of the compromise).

Looking at the finished product drives him back to his own room, phone in hand. He calls her again, asking if Barnes is getting the wrong impression from him (even though Barnes isn’t here yet to get an impression, because in a way he is but no nOOOOOooooO Tony we do not think about that). She’s a smart cookie and can put together things Tony isn’t saying (he’s told her about the gifts before). It was her job, after all.

Carefully she tells him that being thankful isn’t the ‘wrong impression’. She mentions that Bucky likely has some issues specific to Tony when it comes to projecting his desires for redemption, though he is not her client and she cannot say more than that. She can, however, advise Tony against encouraging Bucky’s behavior to become more extreme (dread crawls down the back of Tony’s neck because he’s never been anything but an enabler).

That’s all she’s got on the Case of Bucky Barnes™. Tony gets the feeling she’ll have a lot more soon enough.

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When Tony and Rhodey can’t sleep they work on War Machine. It’s a soothing project that reeks of familiarity and protection and all the warm little things Tony kept inside himself from MIT. War Machine is a labour of love, even if Rhodey still couldn’t stand to get back inside it. Their design changes (all the way back from Siberia) would physically let him, but they couldn’t build themselves out of Rhodey’s brain (not for lack of trying).

So instead of testing War Machine, they just pick over its design again and again and again. It has become an obsession recently. Tony can’t leave it alone and, apparently, neither can Rhodey (they engrave something along War Machine’s spine; “Oh human race, born to fly upward, wherefore at a little wind dost thou so fall?”. There’s a bitter irony to it that they never tell anyone else about).

Eventually, Vision gets sick of their late-night tinkering and haggard early-morning faces. He drags them both to bed, bundling them together and cocooning them in blankets like they were wet kittens he’d found in the rain. Then Vision sits at the foot of their bed and turns his gaze upon the door,
Oddly, that’s enough. They both drop off in an instant.

Over breakfast, RiRi asks Tony why him and Rhodey share a bed (she’d been sneaking around at night, probably headed to one of the labs herself, when she’d seen Vision dragging them around). He tells her he gets scared at night and so does Rhodey. He realizes it’s a crap explanation for RiRi though, since it isn’t the whole explanation.

He explains that Rhodey’s health problems have made life more convenient if someone is close by him at all times (to adjust his bracers, to take readings for their improvement, and to get little things for him so he doesn’t have to take them on and off). After thinking about it some more, Tony also admits that they shared a bed when he was in college because Tony was lonely. Having someone there, someone he could touch, made him feel better (he tried to skim past his memories of one night stands completely. He didn’t want to think about that at all right now, not in front of a questionably impressionable teenage girl).

RiRi scowls at his admittedly sucky explanation. She’s visibly struggling with something for awhile, her eyes flicking from Tony to the couch and then finally to her own hands. Eventually, like pulling teeth, she asks,

“Does it really help?”

And Tony thinks about how little RiRi reaches out to touch other people and how much time she spends in her own head. He opens his mouth and lets the words spill out before he can do something self-sabotaging,

"Maybe not for everyone, but I find touching somebody casually can be like recharging. We could...try it...if you want? I could go for a nap."

They nap on the couch, barely touching at all (RiRi’s head is leaning against his knee and it’s pretty uncomfortable). Tony is awake for most of it and desperately hoping he didn’t screw this up somehow. RiRi seems happier by the time she leaves, so maybe he did good.

The next time he sees her, her hand is is awkwardly fisted in Kamala’s shirt as they talk. Kamala looks like she’s going to explode over how cute it is. Tony snaps some photos through the cameras and sends them to RiRi’s mom.

Soon, Peter hears about the entire thing. In a fit of socially awkward jealousy he webs his hand to Tony’s. It completely ruins both of their schedules, but it’s one of the funniest damn things Tony has ever experienced. Peter is so embarrassed that he’s gone redder than his suit, but his hand is still clutching Tony’s underneath the webbing encasing them. Honestly, Tony couldn’t be mad at all: he could still work with Extremis and this gave him an excuse to visit Peter’s house and to find out how his schooling is going. May didn’t even question the webs too closely (and she fed him, score!).

Two more days until the Rogues return.

Pepper drags Tony to a spa in the Alps (though Tony doesn’t need beauty treatments anymore). She
makes him get his hair cut lush and curly like it used to be when they started dating, and he gets the most divine hot stone massage of his life.

Pepper tells him all about some of the worst bosses she ever had. She tells him about her worst clients. She tells him every single thing she knows about handling people she doesn’t want to handle, trying her absolute best to explain her tactics, and eventually she starts crying into her mud mask (because nothing in Tony’s life right now can ever be as simple as a spa date with a friend, damn it all).

He hugs it out with her, covered in mud and seaweed and some mystery substance, and Pepper complains about how it isn’t fair that they were coming back. She’s mostly angry because she wished she were less busy so she could BE THERE for him. It’s…it’s kindof amazing how thoroughly she’s undersold herself here (it makes Tony feel a little sick, but Pepper is good at taking care of herself. She’d reminded him of that a million times before).

“Running the company is being there for me, Pep.”

He tells her, leaning his forehead against her back and wrinkling his nose as the mud mask crumbles and tickles him,

“You let me take the time off I needed. You’re keeping Stark Industries separate from the Avengers. You protect my employees.”

He’s genuinely startled (his head jerks upwards before he can repress the response with Extremis) when she grumbles under her breath about Rhodey getting to sleep in his bed and be there all the time. She makes a questioning noise at his twitch, then promptly looks horrified with herself (she already knows she can’t actually handle 24/7 Tony time. Tony knows she isn’t insinuating they get back together, even though he wishes…).

Tony, tired and old and very desperate to make Pepper feel better, just tells her,

“I love you, too.”

Simple as that. **Friends.**

(He still aches, still misses her, but he loves her a little differently now. A little less self destructively… he hopes)

She’s quiet after that, not ready to answer (it hurts him, but that’s ok maybe?? He wants Pepper to be able to tell him what she needs someday without worrying what it will do to him).

He doesn’t feel great when he goes home, but he doesn’t feel like a mess either. It’s progress.

Jessica is drinking in the kitchen when he collapses at the counter. She puts the alcohol away without a word, but the scent tugs at his already unraveling sense of self-worth (whoops, there goes the progress. Right out the window with his humanity).

He gets a little angry, says some snide shit about the only non-recovering alcoholic in the house guarding all the alcohol, and then immediately wants to slam his head into a wall. Repeatedly. For the rest of his life.
He briefly considers just making a mental run for it with Extremis, continuing to spew shitty shitty
comments against his will, but Jess just waits him out. Finally, she asks,

“You done?”

In the flattest monotone he’s ever heard from her. Squeezing his eyes shut, he mumbles,

“Yes.”

And tries not let shame eat him alive as she pats him on the shoulder roughly enough to sting. Jessica
goes to bed and, in the new morning light, has clearly decided to never speak of it again (he’s
pathetically grateful).

“I am sick of shadows.”

He whispers to himself once he’s alone in his room, thumbing over an old copy of The Lady of
Shalott. He’s sick of fearing something in the distance. He doesn’t want to be scared when what he’s
scared of hasn’t even arrived yet.

“I am sick of shadows!”

One more day.
Jessica "Ill Omens" Jones

Chapter Summary

The new kids arrive for their first day back in the US. Jessica Jones immediately shoves them all into lockers and steals their lunch money. Bucky gets his homework graded. It's basically a high school AU (no, not really).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Returning to the US doesn’t quite feel like returning home. The Avengers land in Washington with T'Challa and his Doras accompanying them. Bucky struggles with the dissonance “homecoming” contrasted with “surrounded by a military guard” creates in his fractured mind. Hydra homecomings used to be like this when he got uppity. Coming home as a soldier (not the soldier) was like this too, though.

It’s not as if it really mattered. Nowhere was home to Bucky right now.

The US military greets them. Amongst their ranks is the president (a man Bucky couldn’t care less about) and several delegates from the Accords council. Tony Stark isn’t with them. A quick span of the airport and every building overlooking it reveals Tony Stark isn’t there at all.

If he listened closely, Bucky could hear the hubbub in the media vans at the far end of the airstrip. “Where is Stark?” “Where’s the New Avengers?” “How deep is the rift between these two teams?” is all anybody seemed to care about.

After years of toppling governments, Bucky knew that the lack of action could have a greater impact on the populace than any action could. There would be murmurs of concern rippling through the nation right now. Tony Stark’s statement had influenced the opinion of many people who were now filled with doubt.

(Somewhere in Germany, a group of linguists pick through his statement and begin writing a response claiming his words only referred to James Buchanan Barnes and the members of Steve Rogers’ party who weren’t fully aware of their situation. That essay gets scrapped after a particularly catty phone call from an Irish woman who knows too much, but they move forward with an essay on mental health and how understanding does not necessitate forgiveness. It doesn’t get much attention)

The doubt isn’t limited to the media or to their audience. Bucky can practically feel the confusion and unease oozing off of the Avengers backs. Tony’s absence likely isn’t surprising to them, despite the assistance he had sent Bucky in Wakanda, but they had expected…someone.

Accords delegate Kathleen Merkle (part of the dossier Bucky had assembled and memorized behind everyone’s back. Early 50s, greying hair, eyes greener than the grass in T’Challa’s palace. History of kidney disease and PCOS. Would likely die before she reached her 80s, despite her obvious efforts to take care of her health) steps forward to receive them. She looks happy to see them (anybody happy to see Bucky sparks a flare of unease deep in his gut). Before she can speak, however, an
unknown woman rolls in like a storm cloud.

Everything about her, from her bearing to her dark eyes, dark hair, and even darker aura, screamed of ill omens.

Jessica Jones (from the New Avengers lineup, super strength and some limited flight abilities, has been charged with several criminal offences, suspected of at least one murder, brief career as a superhero before becoming a detective) was incandescent with rage and none of them had the slightest idea why (his mind jittered and slipped towards something violent-).

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Jessica Jones was incandescent with rage. Watching Tony collapse into his own mind, trapped in a whirlwind of anxiety and hurt, set off every single thing she had spent the past YEAR working to repress. Tony’s face when he yelled at Peter (for bouncing his leg constantly over dinner, something he literally always did, something Tony had never ever yelled about) was a study in small tragedies.

Everybody knew about Tony’s visits to his therapist. Everybody knew he was working hard. But he was collapsing under the pressure of an old trigger no matter how well he had done while away from it. It reminded her of things she would REALLY rather forget (if Tony, who had been doing so well, couldn’t handle his triggers, what did that mean for her? What did that mean for the rest of her life?).

“I’m late.”

She announces flatly, not offering any apology as she stares at all the gibbering babies surrounding her. Fuck, she hated the president and she hated every single dipshit here, Accords lady included. Oh Jesus, Accords lady was looking right at her with the most strained smile she’d ever seen.

At least the army Generals looked pissed. Somebody was responding to her presence like they should.

Oh, and huh, look at that. There were some amused faces in the crowd. Not everybody wanted these idiots to be here, then. She’d have to tell Tony about that later (after she forced Luke to cook her a nice dinner and got RiRi to braid her hair. She deserved a break).

There was also somebody fixated on her with the air of a super predator (long hair dangling in a face that looked like it belonged behind a mask, the musculature of a brutalist building, and hovering just behind enemy #1’s shoulder). Hello to the most dangerous person in the room, she supposed.

“Who-“

Captain America or whatever he went by now starts to ask, but she swiftly cuts him off with a monotone she'd perfected for press conferences after joining the New Avengers,

“Jessica Jones, New Avenger. Not new like I’m new at heroics, but new as in the name.”

Then, with a dangerous smirk aimed at predator guy (one-armed but ready to kill),
“I could crush you like a pea.”

Captain America bristles but doesn’t attack her (disappointing). An awkward silence descends over the assembled crowd (Jessica violently wants to go home, but everybody who was cut out for this was either too busy or too traumatized for these fools, so here she was).

Clearly the “Rogue Avengers” don’t know what to make of hostility personified (strange, Jessica thought they would be used to it by now. Maybe they were all stupid?). It’s not her problem anymore pretty quickly, because they are all bundled off to a meeting with the entire Accords council and have to shake some military hands. They’ve already agreed to the Accords (as presented by T’Challa, king of backstabbers), though a formal signing is required for publicity.

Jessica would be happy about dumping their dumb asses, but the whole council would be at that meeting. i.e. Tony would be there (what a mess).

Intentionally vague, Jessica gives them instructions about when she’ll come pick them up and what their transport to the compound will be. If she can at least stagger their arrival with Tony’s, this day won’t have been a total bust.

Kathleen Merkle, mousy little demon that she is, tries to subtly dial Tony. Jessica fixes her with such a vicious glare that her hands freeze over entirely, and Jess feels a tiny bit better about her day.

The very back row of chairs in the Accords conference room only contains two people. Tony and Rhodey are leaning against each other and trying to stay out of sight, but Tony knows they won’t entirely escape scrutiny. He wants to go home (the Rogues will be there too, though There was nowhere he could go to get away).

The Rogues enter the room, all straight-backed severity and bullshit dignity, and Tony shifts uncomfortably. Rhodey’s arm tightens around his waist. Tony murmurs to him that it’s alright, but finds himself stuck part way through the sentence.

Bucky Barnes’ gaze instantly zeroes in on him. It feels like a physical weight pushing down on his chest (Barnes’ eyes burn with violent intensity, Christ, what was his deal!?). His heart rabbits in his chest and Barnes cocks his head like he can fucking hear it. Rhodey flinches and tugs Tony behind his shoulders as best he can while trapped in a shitty office chair.

Living nightmare Bucky Barnes begins to power walk (murder strut?!??) forward and Extremis sparks to life in Tony’s head. A map of the whole complex shudders and fills in with various strategies on how to minimize loss of life, but Rogers grabs onto his buddy’s elbow and begins to whisper furiously in his ear. Barnes stops moving entirely, however his stare doesn’t shift away from Tony for a single second.

Disconcerted, Tony pointedly turns to face T’Challa with his most resentful expression (he’d been perfecting it in the mirror lately. He wouldn’t let T’Challa one up him in this). T’Challa looks unimpressed, but also a little bit like he feels bad???? Tony considers it a mission somewhat accomplished (see Rhodey? Practice does make perfect!).
The signing goes alright despite Barnes’ increasingly murder-licious expression and the ugly set of Rogers’ jaw. Even though Natasha slips Tony a note through nefarious means, that goes alright too. Rhodey’s solution was…unconventional but functional.

... 

i.e. he fucking ate the note in a moment of pure crystallized hilarity.

(Tony saved the footage and would probably watch it on loop for the rest of his life. Natasha’s face had been priceless. Rhodey’s face had been better. The fact that he swallowed even after thinking through what he had done was the best)

Tony didn’t get to really enjoy it properly in the present, though. The moment his throat had twitched, the weight of Barnes’ gaze had switched to it (murder stares aimed at his throat were never good), but hey, he could always enjoy the moment later. He could enjoy any moment later if he managed to escape this room alive.

Hasty as Hell, Tony flees the signing (if he was lucky, he could get to the compound without ever talking to any of the Rogues AND he could apologize to Peter about the yelling this morning). However, Hell isn’t hasty enough for genuine demon Bucky Barnes, oh my GOD. He ghosts around the corner like every goddamn nightmare Tony had ever had and just APPEARS right behind Tony even though he is supposed to be UNDER GUARD and Tony didn’t even see him earlier so how-

Extremis grips onto his panic-laced thoughts and directs them to thought patterns he had prepared specifically for this kind of event (his therapist sighed whenever he talked about ‘programming his thoughts’ but if the analogy helped, it helped). Admittedly, he had expected Rogers instead of Barnes, but hey, plans change. Tony decides to fixedly pretend he doesn’t see Barnes. He picks up Rhodey, bracers and all, and fucking sprints out the door.

Goodbye, cruel world!

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Bucky watches Tony Stark carry Colonel James Rhodes in his arms like he was a bride going over a threshold at Mach 2. He watches his escape carefully, trying to analyze every aspect of the situation.

Bucky had wanted to ask if Tony Stark had gotten his gifts, maybe say thank you in person, but Steve told him his expression wasn’t really a thankful one and recommended he wait. T’Challa wouldn’t say anything about his gifts when he asked. Bucky was pretty sure Tony Stark hadn’t appreciated the essay, so he didn’t want to bring that up at all. He probably hadn’t seen the clumsy attempt at a letter to the editor on the linguistics paper...Bucky wasn’t a scientist, so anything he had to say probably came across as delusional ranting. So the gifts were all he had.

Embarrassed but determined, Bucky has waited until “later”, however Tony Stark had fled. Did that mean “later” was at the compound? Did Tony Stark not want anyone to see Bucky thanking him? He hadn’t exactly been open about his help.
Maybe…maybe Tony Stark didn’t want to be thanked. T’Challa would’ve told Bucky that though, wouldn’t he? Or Steve? Or someone? He didn’t really…back in the day you had to say thank you even when somebody told you not to. It was good manners. Besides, Bucky wanted to say it. He wanted to say sorry, too, but he got the distinct impression he would have to work his way up to that because sorry wasn’t something you could say non-verbally (even Steve cringed whenever Bucky tried too hard to express emotions verbally. It was always a mess).

Bucky stews in his thoughts during the painfully awkward ride back to the compound. Jessica looks like she wants to murder them all (Bucky would know). Unease surrounds him and chokes him, everybody’s body language poking away at his psyche like hot needles. Steve keeps trying to talk to him, however Bucky is pretty busy trying to figure out if Tony Stark even knows the gifts are from Bucky.

Oh.

Oh, he probably doesn’t know. Bucky was still a criminal at the time, so he hadn’t put his name on them. He had hoped they’d make Tony Stark smile, but forgot that the point was a “thank you”. Were anonymous gifts creepy? Were his gifts even any good?

Bucky looks blankly off into the middle distance, wondering why nobody stopped him from being an idiot. What was he going to do if he saw one of his gifts around the compound? What was he going to do if he didn’t (he probably wouldn’t. They were stupid. Tony Stark was a rich man who didn’t need knick-knacks and Bucky was an idiot-)?

“Buck?”

Steve tries, delicately curling a hand around his bicep. Bucky turns his blank stare on his best friend and whispers,

“Stevie…why didn’t you guys tell me that gifts were stupid?”

Awkwardly, Bucky realizes he hadn’t told anyone but T’Challa about the gifts. He’d started sending them when they were all still angry and had kind of…forgotten to mention it? Based off Steve’s wince, he at least knew (which was probably because he hadn’t tried to hide it at all), but everyone else was confused (Sam was squinting at him like he was some kind of puzzle to solve again and Bucky kindof wanted to break his face).

“Nevermind.”

He mumbles, resolving not to speak of this for the rest of the drive and maybe the rest of his life. However, that resolve was absolutely crushed under a wave of laughter from the front seat.

“You’re creepy gift stalker?”

Jessica Jones asks (she was a sadist. Bucky was putting that in her dossier. Just watch him). Bucky feels shame burning its way up from his belly to his ears and doesn’t respond, but that’s as good as an answer to somebody like her.

“Oh my God,”

She wheezes,
“He liked the cold porcelain, said some bullshit about the Russian style being the best for emulating nature or whatever. Said some quote from some old book and everything. That’s how you know he’s happy.”

She’s clearly enjoying watching Bucky squirm, but after the “creepy gift stalker” comment he was willing to lap up any sign his gifts hadn’t all been disturbing garbage (the knives, what had he been thinking-). There’s a barb buried in her little speech that he doesn’t see, though. Steve stiffens beside him and whispers,

“He quotes classical literature…”?

And oh no, that’s his tone for when the question isn’t really a question and is moreso a device to keep crushing sadness at bay. Bucky has vague memories of hearing it when he’d asked Bucky if he had enlisted and sharper memories of hearing it in relation to his current self. Automatically, his arm extends to pat Steve on the back, but it freezes mid-motion.

Why was Steve sad about not knowing this? Why does it matter? It would only be relevant if he and Tony were friends, and Jessica Jones’ words implied that Tony’s friends would have known this habit already. Therefore, were Steve and Tony friends? If they were, why didn’t he know? If they weren’t, why did it matter?

Bucky’s brain stalls and then comes up with a new answer: Jessica Jones was lying.

As if she can read his mind, Jessica (demoted from Jones for being cruel) laughs. It’s a nasty laugh – outright spiteful.

“Blodeuwedd, the flower maiden? Representation of transformation, has something to do with that poem, Vacillation somehow? And he that Attis’ image hangs between, That staring fury and the blind lush leaf, May know not what he knows, but knows not grief?”

She snorts in disbelief at their silence,

“If you haven’t picked up a single piece of unwanted mythology or poetry in all these years, I struggle to believe you are who you say you are. Fucking fakes.”

Unbidden, Bucky’s thoughts turn to his poorly received essay. They trickle down the pages, rolling into the footnotes of some of Tony’s college papers on the ethical lessons of great literary works.

“No longer in Lethean foliage caught
Begin the preparation for your death
And from the fortieth winter by that thought
Test every work of intellect or faith,
And everything that your own hands have wrought
And call those works extravagance of breath
That are not suited for such men as come
Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb.”

Had been used repeatedly. It had been rewritten, chopped up in the signature style of Tony’s second year, and blended with another stanza to bring up his points on regret and its influence on the concept of inherent goodness.
“Things said or done long years ago,
Or things I did not do or say
But thought that I might say or do,
Weigh me down, and not a day
But something is recalled,
My conscience or my vanity appalled.”

Bucky had used it as justification for the statement that Tony had been concerned about the consequences of his inventions long before Afghanistan. It had been one of his better points, he thought. They were quotes from Vacillation. William Butler Yeats. Jessica hadn’t been lying, though he had no idea what flowers had to do with Yeats.

Bucky is about to ask, partially because he’s an idiot and partially because he’s curious, when Wanda sits upright in her seat and glares at the back of Jessica’s head for a single tense moment. Then, abruptly, she flinches back in pain (something crawls underneath Bucky’s skin and he turns his thoughts back to the poem, the poem, how did it relate to flowers, was it transformation or the questions about death).

“You can’t get into my head, girly.”

Jessica’s voice carves right through Bucky’s concentration like butter. She takes her eyes off the road completely and smiles all teeth at Wanda,

“Somebody else beat you to it. When I killed him, I killed the way in, too.”

(Bucky checked one “suspected” murder off in his mind as confirmed. While he was at it, he confirmed “sadist” too)

“Invading the privacy of somebody’s mind is the action of human filth. I’ll be reporting this.”

(It hadn’t occurred to Bucky that they could report this kind of thing now. That if he felt Wanda’s fingers digging into his psyche while he drifted, that he could complain to someone)

“I was only confirming whether or not you were telling the truth!”

Wanda yells (Bucky presses himself away from her, a tiny movement, but Steve’s grip on his bicep doesn’t even allow that and he wants, just a little bit, to scream). Bucky doesn’t like her powers or where they come from. He doesn’t even know if he likes her.

“You could have just asked, moron. Or better yet, just let it go because it doesn’t matter. It’s not like you’ll ever get to talk to Tony again.”

Jessica says and Bucky knows it’s bait, but he doesn’t stop Steve from asking the only natural question.

“What?”

Steve’s voice is thready. Bucky watches Natasha squeeze her eyes shut. She also knew Jessica had been telling the truth (the Red Room appreciated culture as a weapon. Saying things without saying them. They had taught him a dozen layers of abstraction). There’s a shimmer of genuine regret in her posture (never in her eyes, never where you would look) and it makes Bucky wonder about the time Steve spent away from him (about the people who took his place).
“Why not?”

Steve asks, voice stronger but fists clenched as he releases Bucky’s arm.

“Because,”

Jessica says, relishing the moment (*Bucky could see how she became a murderer. It was right there, just underneath her skin*),

“I won’t let you.”

No matter what else they ask, she wouldn’t respond. The rest of the car ride is spent in a horrible kind of silence.

Bucky has a sinking feeling and one goal in mind: re-evaluate his tactics for thanking Tony Stark.

_______

True to Jessica’s word, they don’t see Tony when they arrive at the compound. In fact, they don’t see anyone. Jessica just drops them on the western edge of the place and says,

“They’re your problem now, Friday.”

Before she disappears. Friday tells them they aren’t allowed in the housing space or school for the New Avengers. Clint, silent for the entire car ride, snipes about their pardon and their right to move freely. Friday tells them that this rule isn’t a UN provision; they aren’t welcome in another person’s home just like they aren’t welcome across foreign borders. Her tone is acidic.

Friday states that their needs will be met for living and training. However, they had to fill request logs to track anything they aren’t paying for with their own salary. She tells them that an ACTUAL UN restriction is that they can’t move away from the compound for at least a year. Nobody trusts them to not simply flee the country. The way she says it heavily implies they are naughty children she is tired of dealing with.

Finally, ignoring the other Avengers, she addresses Bucky with,

“If I may direct you to your rooms, Mr Barnes?”

Re-evaluating his strategy based on Friday’s protectiveness of the compound and of Tony Stark, Bucky quickly follows her guiding lights. Clint and Wanda whisper suspiciously behind him and Natasha’s posture screams sadness despite the fact she hasn’t moved. Sam is too busy geeking out over AI to aim any of his emotions towards Bucky, but Steve is pressed up against Bucky’s back and he’s worse than 5 people combined.

Bucky’s new room looks like Romania. It *smells* like Romania. There’s a certain kind of wood polish, one brand popular in the city he’d been living in, that smelled a little bit like clove-studded oranges (*faint, well-worn, but his room smelled like that. It had always smelled like that*). He
instantly spots the depression in the floor, though he can see it would be easy to hide if he so wished.

The room is… comfortable.

He hasn’t been comfortable in a long time.

In a haze, Bucky trails the fingers of his only hand over every inch of the depression while Steve watches him uncomfortably from the doorway. He doesn’t step any further into the room, used to the way Bucky gets about things that are “his” (it had required many painful lessons, both before his fall and after, to beat Steve’s stubborn idea that everything that was Bucky’s was his, too). There’s a look on Steve’s face, painful and far away, but Bucky can’t parse it through the haze (longing?).

“Do all the rooms look like this?”

Bucky asks Steve on his third pass over the depression, but it isn’t Steve who answers him.

“No. This room was designed with you in mind.”

Is Friday’s response. The look on Steve’s face gets worse. It’s tipping towards anger, (though with Steve that could mean anything… his jaw was sticking out kinda funny though, which meant he was probably mad at himself).

“Were all of the rooms designed with someone in mind?”

Steve asks and, for a second, it looks like Friday won’t answer him at all. Finally she says, “No.”

And, to Bucky’s horror, he feels a thrill of excitement curl his toes and fingers. It’s strong, forcing him to press his hand flat to the floor to stop it from trembling, and he desperately glances at Steve (hoping he hadn’t seen it). The devastation he finds there is enough to crush the feeling. In the blink of an eye, Steve has pulled the Captain America façade over Steve Rogers and Bucky feels helpless guilt pooling in his chest.

“I see.”

Steve murmurs, turning his back on Bucky,

“Can you take me to my room, Friday? I’d like to be alone for awhile.”

Chapter End Notes

Bucky loves last names because he is always throwing together a personal file for people in his head. The only time he stops is when he has a genuine human interaction with them instead of a threat assessment.

Jessica: *bulies Bucky*
Bucky: Ah, I see, we have made a human connection with one another
Jessica, disgusted: *bullies Bucky harder*
Lesson One

Chapter Summary

Bucky passes the first "Stop Being Creepy Plz" test and fails the second one so badly that he retroactively fails the first.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room is softly lit, shadows creeping in from every corner, and Tony is buried under several layers of blankets. He has locked the door and isolated himself from his friends for the time being (they were too much for him to handle without saying something cruel). He’s grateful for the isolation once Friday’s voice emits quietly from his phone,

“Mr Barnes likes his room.”

Tony didn’t want anybody to know how personal he’d gotten with Barnes’ apartment. He also didn’t want anybody to know that he’d already succumbed to watching Barnes run his fingers over the inside of his closet (he’d gotten Friday to lock him out after that. She locked him out of all of the Rogues rooms for good measure).

“He smelled the floor.”

She says, a slightly amused edge to her voice (he missed the way Friday used to laugh, loud and carefree),

“It was the strangest thing.”

It wasn’t all that funny to Tony right now, though he appreciated the effort. He knew full well that Friday knew why Barnes had done that. She’d helped him find the polish, guiding him through the vast expanse of distractions in his internet search (he had accidentally learned a lot of Romanian before she had pulled him away. He was grateful – he’d been pulling from Google Translate and who knows what kind of faulty language skills that would’ve given him).

Sighing, he stuck a hand out of his blanket nest and patted the wall. His baby girl was always doing her best. He wanted to let her know how much he appreciated her, despite everything, despite how he had difficulty looking at her (in the abstract sense). Patting at the walls or his phone felt insufficient. Intangible. He was going to upgrade her controls in the compound and install her with a hydroponic garden or something.

Or…

He nudges his mind ever so slightly against her presence in the room, leaning against her for just a second. The lights flicker in surprise before she leans back, the barest brush of her code (her soul) against his.

It was warm (and felt like acceptance).
Weeks pass with the Rogues only interactions being with the media, Accords council, or US government. The compound feels abandoned, even though both Steve and Bucky can pick up laughter on the wind and Wanda can feel the energy of the others (she twitches whenever Hope Van Dyne whirls through the compound, filled with joy that seems displaced here. Or at least, that’s what Bucky had put together from the way the compound seemed to light up with voices during those visits). They still haven’t met any of the New Avengers. They haven’t even had Jessica Jones blow down their door.

So, of course, when the tension is thickest (Clint has begun to complain about just strolling into the east side, asking who was going to stop him), Jessica knocks on their door hard enough to shake the building (Bucky tries not to be disappointed that it’s her. He fails).

“How do you find the training facilities?”

She asks with a gigantic smirk on her face (bait again. It was always the same with her). Jessica’s expression makes Bucky tired (this woman was full of broken edges that rubbed up against his in the worst way).

“We haven’t been to them.”

Clint snarls, rising to the bait like every member of this team seemed to,

“We haven’t been given permission.”

He strains the word permission as if he’s trying to throttle it. Jessica gasps (falsely, her eyes widen too far, her breathing remains unaltered-), and says,

“Whatever do you mean? You’ve always been allowed into the east training facilities!”

Her eyes are flinty despite the confused (fake fake fake) expression on her face,

“How else would you train to work with heroes in the field? You can use our offices, too.”

Clint looks murderous and Steve isn’t too far behind him (he’d never appreciated being looked down on like this. Whenever somebody yanked his chain and got in his way, Steve had always bulldozed right over them…the thought had a trickle of alarm was pressing itself out of Bucky’s skin, but he strangled it mercilessly).

Jessica shuts the door in their face and is gone by the time Steve has wrenched it back open.

Silently, Bucky slips away from the roiling tension in the hallway to his room. He knows exactly what’s coming (if they don’t head to the east facility, Bucky would eat his hat…or shoe, since he doesn’t really wear hats anymore). He digs around for clothes that don’t make him look quite so abandoned. He still remembered how to make a good impression when it counted, though fashion had changed a lot since he last cared about it. After a few moment of deliberation, he also retrieves his book on Arthurian plants and the lemon balm he had pressed within it (after several tries that had just left wet smears on the pages).
Friday’s presence uncomfortably looms all around him. She hadn’t said anything when he’d ordered the book, but he got the distinct impression that she knew what he was doing and didn’t exactly approve. There was a weight to the silences surrounding him now that there hadn’t been before (it was the weight of potential punishment. Bucky was used to it).

Slipping out the door and heading for the training facility is easy. Only Natasha’s eyes trail after his back (he didn’t understand why she didn’t follow him. She clearly wanted to). Everyone else was too bust arguing to notice Bucky and the book tucked awkwardly into his jacket underneath his missing arm.

Bucky finds Jessica lurking outside the largest gym in the facility, right where he expected her. She looks disappointed to see him. A lot of people did though, so he tried not to let it bother him too much.

“Just you?”

She asks, snorting when he nods and says,

“For now.”

Knowing that the Avengers will get there eventually.

“Typical. Can’t even have fun with the one that shows up.”

Jessica complains. She turns on her heels, but Bucky fumbles the book out from the inside of his jacket and thrusts it towards her (nearly dropping it on her toes, which would’ve been funny if it wouldn’t damage the cover).

”I’m not allowed to uh,”

He fidgets (fingers tapping over the cover of the book, relishing in being able to twitch and move instead of staying stiller than a winter landscape),

“Talk to Tony Stark right? Can you give this to him and tell him thank you?”

His fidgeting worsens as her expression sours,

“Or is telling him thank you considered talking? If it is, could you just give him the book?”

Jessica stares at him, so he keeps rambling (verbal communication, stabbing him in the back yet again),

“I didn’t write anything in it, so it’s not really talking. It’s just something I thought would make him happy, since the room made me happy and so did the scrambler. Uh, I thought doing it like this would be less alarming than dropping things on his doorstep? In retrospect, not my best work, I probably should’ve realized he wouldn’t know it was me...”
Blessedly, Jessica holds up a hand to stop him. He thinks, for one wasted second, that she is handing him some kind of mercy. He’s wrong.

“He knew it was you. He just didn’t want to.”

She tells him, totally deadpan, which ok, that hurt. That hurt and was also fair (*Hell it was probably more than he deserved, though a distant part of him that was sepia-toned and full of Brooklyn moxy was pretty fuckin’ offended*).

“Would he take it as repayment then? If it wasn’t a thank you, would he take it?”

He urges and her expression gets a little strange. Bucky is good at identifying body language, though the reasoning behind it doesn’t always filter through. The series of micro-expressions displayed on Jessica’s face were difficult to decipher. There’s a moment where he thinks she’s trying not to laugh, but she’s also angry. Then there is disgust, though it seems to be directed at more than just himself.

“Why are you trying to force a gift on somebody who doesn’t want it? Isn’t that shit thing to do?”

She asks (*yeah, ok, that was probably disgust at him. Just disgust in general. Wasn’t that grand?*). Bucky frowns, fingers brushing over the book in a self-soothing motion,

“Does he not want it? He sent me stuff first. I wanted to...do something in return.”

Bucky realizes he sounds a little petulant when Jessica heaves an angry sigh. Startlingly, she takes the book from his hand despite his whining.

“If all you care about is him having something to make him happy, I won’t tell him you bought this. I’ll say I got it. He’ll like it, but it won’t be from you.”

She growls, curling her fingers into the binding and denting it. Bucky kind of hates Jessica, though this also feels like a test he needs to pass. Did he want Tony Stark’s attention or did he just want him to feel as alright (*good?? Did Bucky feel good???) as Bucky did when he first got the scrambler?

“Ok.”

He agrees, nodding and heading into the gym, knowing everyone else probably wasn’t far behind. Though he can’t see her, Bucky feels Jessica stiffen in surprise at his acquiescence.

He really hopes he did the right thing.

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“Here you go.”

Jessica says, slamming a book down unnecessarily hard on the countertop next to Tony’s head. He had just given up on his fifth attempt to apologize to Peter for yelling at him (*the kid seemed to think everything was fine, but Tony still felt really bad, especially because he’d continued to be a bit snappish to everybody all this time*). He was tired and sad and didn’t need to be attacked by literature.
“What’s this?”

He mumbles into the countertop. Jess heaves a heavy sigh and shoves the book into his face. It smells like lemon balm and he’s a bit confused (Jessica Jones???? Giving gifts?????? That smell nice???????? To him?????????????).

"I got you one of your lame ass books, so cheer the fuck up. I enter any room you’re in and it’s like all of my hopes and dreams just drain away."

She says, gesturing emphatically, and Tony feels a little less like he’s in a strange dream where Jess believes in kindness.

“You don’t have any hopes or dreams, you nightmare creature.”

He bitches, obediently sitting up to look at the book. He hopes it’s not a detailed account of how to murder mind readers. Jessica had been in a mood ever since Wanda had poked at her brain. The council was figuring out how to deal with it still, trying to work out all the little kinks in their “let’s bring back a bunch of adult babies with superpowers and hope it all works out” plan.

Huh.

The book is about Arthurian garden plants. Looks like a fully illustrated deal, too. It was done in watercolours. Would’ve had to be custom ordered.

…

He had the most uncomfortable feeling Jessica wasn’t the one who bought it.

“Thanks,”

He says slowly, trying to ignore the feeling of foreboding that has been hovering his back for weeks (maybe Jess robbed somebody? Maybe it had been given to her as a gift?).

“I love it.”

Which is true. He does love it (as much as he can love an ill omen). It’ll go right into his collection with all the unicorn stories, legends, and the encyclopedia of legendary swords Rhodey had gotten him over the years (Rhodey had snuck in some extra pages on magical girl swords. Tony hadn’t noticed for the longest time that they were from animes because that bastard had actually paid an artist to make them look more realistic).

Him and Jessica stare at each other for awhile in the steadily thickening silence. A migraine is worming its way in behind Tony’s eyes even though he knows Extremis should make that impossible. He stands up, mumbling,

“I’m gonna go…put this in my room.”
He reads the book that night and has fun playing with the bunches of lemon balm tucked between every page (his sheets are going to smell like it for days). It gets all over his hands, but he doesn’t mind much. Extremis had done funny things to his sense of smell, so jamming his nose in things was turning into something of a hobby. Besides, the lemon balm is a really thoughtful gesture since it IS an Arthurian herd. However, it was thoughtful, and, therefore, definitely not from Jess.

He decides not to think about it. He doesn’t want to ruin a perfectly good book with fear sweat.

Tony Stark had been in the training room since the last time Bucky was there. His hands had touched the rowing machine and chest press, had dragged over the shower tiles and the some of the heavier weights. Bucky could tell because of the ever so slight scent of lemon balm clinging to something musky and good.

It was a healthy scent, something Bucky could only detect after the serum. He could identify certain diseases now (like the rats that could sniff out tuberculosis…that had been a fun read, though he didn’t appreciate being related to a rat in any way shape or form), and a couple of other oddities. Like if somebody was biologically male (heavy musk) or female (lighty acidic), or if they were a child (sweet and cottony) or an adult (drier and slightly bitter).

There was also something subtle that he could smell on some people, something familiar and musky and good versus the same thing but...bad (most people he had met were bad, though Natasha had always been good and so had a dark haired man The Soldier had taken hostage and not killed in’09. He has the fleeting thought that Dottie, one of the girls from before the war, would be good)? He had never tried to describe it while he was The Soldier. Describing things post-soldier wasn’t one of Bucky’s many talents either, so he’d stick to his piss poor internal descriptions.

He wasn’t sure what it was, but Tony smelled good.

Huh, Bucky could probably find traces of him around the compound now (a shiver of excitement made his fingertips tingle and twitch. It was a hunter’s instinct). As he traces Tony’s movements throughout the gym for a second time, it occurs to Bucky that this (learning Tony’s scent, using it) could be seen as intentional. If he ever tells anyone about it he could be punished. He doesn’t want to be punished. Therefore, Bucky decides to keep this discovery to himself (he doesn’t want to tell anyway. He doesn’t like the idea that Steve might pick up on the good too, making Bucky share it).

Unfortunately for him, he talks to Steve too much to not let at least one,

“This’s good that Tony is so healthy. It’s unusual for a man his age.”

Slip in front of him. Steve looks vaguely disturbed, but people usually look that way in front of Bucky, so he tries not to be offended.

Chapter End Notes
I've always wondered a bit about super soldier sense of smell. There's a lot of really interesting research on humans being kinda shit at detecting things (like pheromones) that most animals require as a base part of social interaction. Pheromones don't smell in the traditional sense - they are difficult to categorize beyond the reactions they produce! A lot of people like to write them as being pleasant or vanillic etc., but actual scent chemistry would never allow that. Instead, they produce an emotional reaction without any conscious awareness of a categorical scent family. When Bucky says something is 'good', he actually kinda means it feels good, ohohohohoho.

Anyway, short chapter is short because I have a midterm and some things to brush up on. The next one is pretty heavy and won't be out for a few days.

_____ 

**Bucky:** *inhales*

**Bucky:** Tony is 40 miles west, ate a salad for lunch and a handful of blueberries, and also...

**Bucky:** *inhales again, being extra weird about it this time*

**Bucky:** He's hot
Carol "Takes No Shit" Danvers

Chapter Summary

No secrets manage to stay secret for long. Unless, of course, you want them to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just having the Rogues in the US wasn’t enough. Tony knew this. He knew they had to make some kind of progress (for when the team he had now wasn’t enough, probably sooner than even he suspected).

The two teams had to meet. They shared a training space, for fucks sake. They would have to enter the field together at some point (with some notable exceptions – Tony would never be alone with Rogers ever again. He had the paperwork and everything. Rhodey wasn’t allowed to be alone with Rogers for different…more violent reasons). Tony had been delaying it, but he didn’t have an excuse to put it off any longer. His impartial third party, recruited months ago, was finally finished with her NASA contract.

Colonel Carol Danvers was moving in.

Carol was a powerhouse with a soft squishy core, just like Rhodey. However, unlike Rhodey, she wouldn’t let Tony pull any bullshit (not that Rhodey usually did. Rhodey was either involved in the bullshit or the voice of reason, there was never any ‘let’ about it. Still, Rhodey was softer than usual about this). She knew exactly what she was there for and she was going to start the second she made landfall.

She was going to their Joint Field Commander (JFC…jesus fucking Christ).

Tony and Rhodey might instruct the New Avengers in spirit, but neither of them were field ready. Extremis swelled and ebbed beneath Tony’s skin, stable though not nearly battle-tested enough for the unpredictable scenarios he’d be facing. Once, he might’ve rushed into the fray and tested it there (before he had images of a building crushing a kid just out of high school…his fault). Extremis needed careful concealment and control that Tony wasn’t capable of yet. And Rhodey…

Rhodey still hadn’t gotten back in the suit (Rhodey sitting in the workshop, gazing at the chrome plating, running his fingers over the plates with such longing and terror-).

Carol would use the two of them for strategy and support. Instruction, too, since they were already adept in training both the children and the New Avengers. Until they were both back on their feet (if they ever were), this arrangement would have to suffice. It suited them.
What didn’t suit them was Carol wanting everybody (and she meant everybody) present for the first training simulation between both teams.

**Fucking Hell.**

An unexpected notification comes through while the Avengers are eating dinner. A woman’s voice, Colonel Carol Danvers (their field commander?), instructs them to be in the eastern training facility for a joint simulation at 0:800 tomorrow. Her tone is confident, her instructions are to the point, and Bucky is dead certain she is military to the bone.

Steve turns to Natasha slowly, concern flickering across his face as he asks,

“I thought Tony was the field commander here?”

Natasha looks just as confused as Bucky felt. Technically, under the Accords, Tony was their field commander (had he passed it on?).

“Boss is the commander of the New Avengers.”

Friday pipes up, startling Sam into dropping his potatoes,

“He will act in a purely support capacity during integrated missions.”

Her voice was strangely flat and robotic (or maybe Bucky was strange for thinking that). He felt a brief flicker of empathy for her ability to stop being human at will. Steve and Natasha trade a look Bucky doesn’t quite understand, then Sam asks,

“Will Tony be on the field with us during ‘integrated missions’?”

Friday’s voice remains flat even though the phrasing of her response is smug,

“No. Boss has received a few upgrades that require testing in a trust-worthy environment.”

Bucky leans lightly against Steve’s shoulder as Sam covers his other side before Steve can even finish wincing. Though his body is going through comforting motions, Bucky’s mind is whirling (upgrades? Of his tech? No, the phrasing was too personal for that, But Bucky had watched Tony speak about his suit. The personal aspect may not be that unusual. Still-). Suddenly, a piece of information strikes him like bomb shrapnel and he can’t shake it loose.

News of “ReStark”, the rejuvenation of Tony Stark via either plastic surgery or something else, had reached Wakanda. So had news of Tony’s medical leave, though Bucky had been in cryo then. He had watched it later (curiosity driving him to hoard information constantly), though it seemed none of the Avengers had watched it because…

Because…

Steve wasn’t trying just as hard as Bucky to apologize right now (he had hospitalized a man he considered his friend, he was sad that he didn’t know Tony liked to read, he had sent that phone, sent that letter, Steve was always like this-). How hadn’t Bucky thought of that immediately? Why
hadn’t it seemed strange? He was supposed to know about Steve-

Another thought clawed its way to the surface. Tony’s scent. It had been good. Really good. Fresh and healthy...and Tony was in his early 50s. Or rather, he had been.

Bucky’s fingers twitch before he goes absolutely still and focused. He draws up the memory: the scent marks Tony had left behind were that of a man in his prime. His face had lines, but Bucky had stared hard at it for an extended period of time at the signing and, past the veil of his own expectations and the expression lines of a tired man, Tony’s face had been smooth. Too smooth. Too untextured for a man that old.

And during the signing meeting, for less than half a second behind his sunglasses and possibly some kind of contacts...his eyes had flashed brilliant arc reactor blue.

"Bucky?"

Steve asks. Bucky suddenly realized everyone was staring at him. He had no idea how long he had been zoning out for.

“I was just thinking about actually training, getting back into the thick of things."

He says, shifting his gaze towards Natasha,

“I’ve got a lot of things to make up for."

Steve squeezed his shoulder, clearly wanting to say his usual spiel (Steve wanted so badly for the world to be good, but if he was in Bucky’s position, Bucky knew he would blame himself too), but Bucky had yelled him out of it a month or so after he first woke up from cryo. It had taken Steve awhile to stop saying it (though Bucky could practically still hear him thinking it).

Natasha catches Bucky in the hall later.

“Upgrades. You were thinking about upgrades."

She states. Sometimes it makes Bucky uneasy that his face has become as emotive as it has. Sometimes he’s uneasy about the fact that it doesn’t move at all, though. He’s perpetually uneasy, but at least the person who read his intentions was Natasha (he’d be embarrassed if it was Sam). He nods at her statement and wonders if he should tell her what was on his mind (anyone else would think he was delusional for picking over something so small, but Natasha appreciated dedication to every single detail).

“He’s younger than he should be. Whatever that upgrade was, it changed his physiology."

Bucky tells her (hoping she won’t ask how he knows for sure. That knowledge was his and his alone). She looks troubled (Bucky knows it’s all a show. She wants to tell him something).

“What?”
He urges her.

"Tony would never let somebody else change his body. Even though he’s living in the future, he’s surprisingly content with some of his more…human limitations."

She says, a furrow digging itself between her brows,

“Tony likes being old. I don’t know why and he certainly bitches about it enough for you to think he doesn’t, but he does. It’s strange to see that change.”

Almost against his will, largely because he’s been curious and incredulous and a thousand other emotions (and an idiot. Never forget an idiot, Bucky Barnes), Bucky pulls a barb from his own skin and slips it into hers,

“He was on medical leave for months after Siberia. Maybe he had to change.”

Natasha’s expression went completely blank without even the slightest twitch. It still tells Bucky everything: she hadn’t known. Somehow, none of the Avengers had paid attention to such a huge piece of news (maybe they didn’t want to. Natasha was always weak to love).

”He didn’t sustain that much damage.”

Natasha says. There’s something final in her tone (it bothers Bucky. It feels like a challenge).

“What makes you so sure?”

He shoots back. Natasha gives him a poisonous look,

“Neither you or Steve reported him being in critical condition. He flew home. He gave a press conference the next day.”

Bucky found whatever calm he had managed to scrape together over the past few months instantly obliterated. He knows how easily men die later. After the paramedics leave. After they go home. How often they realize something was wrong too late. He’s angry. He can’t stop thinking about Steve’s sad face (where he’s pretending to ask a question and the answer is something that will crush him alive) and the scrambler and Tony Stark’s too-blue gaze right next to an anguished brown one (it had screamed for Maria, matching her perfectly. Her eyes in another’s face).

“Neither of us checked. I didn’t know anything about the man in the suit. I don’t even know if he needs to be conscious to pilot it or if somebody else took him home. And I mean, really - he gave a press conference when he had the arc reactor and was suffering from months of torture, Natasha.”

He spits, almost recoiling from his own vehemence. But then Natasha tries to say something and Bucky (doesn’t stop feeling bad but he can’t stop-) bites out the next words like raw ground-up meat,

“Ask Steve. Ask him to his face if he checked. None of you looked up the news because you didn’t want to know - because Steve can’t stand knowing. He can’t stand knowing he hurt somebody that didn’t deserve it for me.”

Now that he was angry, it was like Bucky couldn’t stop feeling. Hysteria was crawling up his throat
along with a terrible litany of why directed at the hole in the floor of his room and the space to hide in his closet and the scrambler embedded in both of his ear canals and his temples (doubled up for double the safety. Why be safe? Why be sorry? Why why wh-).

It’s too much. Bucky vanishes. He leaves Natasha in the dust and he fucking disappears from the west compound he’s supposed to be confined in (why such shitty security when he could-). He takes himself to the training gym and hauls his body up the wall with one arm (why not just take this one, too-) to the nests in the rafters where he promptly shuts down. He can hear Friday trying to talk to him, but he can’t answer (why would she even address him-).

He can’t do anything. He could never do anything without somebody to tell him what to do. He almost misses having a handler for one sick second, but none of them ever told him why either.

(Why)

_____

Knee-deep in meetings between himself, Carol, and individual members of the New Avengers, Tony gets an alert. It bounces against his consciousness irritatingly. Carol wanted to re-evaluate everyone, update their profiles since the last time she had visited (back when Tony had first tried to recruit her), and it was his job to give her any extra information she might need. He could check whatever this was later-

The alert was persistent though. It wasn’t one he was familiar with yet, so it had never been triggered before.

Glancing away during a lull in Peter and Carol’s conversation, Tony quickly succumbs to temptation and checks. Abruptly, all the lights in the compound flicker. Peter’s head snaps around to stare at Tony while Carol peers at the ceiling in irritation.

“Fucking Hell.”

Tony breathes, processing Friday’s panicky and guilt-ridden message (he’d been letting his baby girl go wild without supervision or even communication, and now he’d really fucking stepped in it).

“Mr Stark?”

Peter asks as Tony gets to his feet,

“Bucky Barnes is catatonic in the gym. Nobody got him a fucking therapist, did they?”

Tony grumbles, running a hand down his face and pacing,

“Jesus, nobody even did a psych evaluation once he was pardoned. I’ve been avoiding everything to do with him and nobody else fucking did it.”

Carol looks alarmed (probably at the crazy pacing and the lights flickering like the opening to a horror movie. God, he was such a mess, he had JUST gotten her to agree to being here). She
reaches out to Tony instead of recoiling like he’d expected,

“I’ll go. I’m going to be his field commander and this will be a good opportunity to get him checked up on.”

She tries, but Tony isn’t having any of it (this was his mess, his gigantic stupid didn’t-even-think-about-it mess). His eyes are glowing a vivid blue as he tries to reason with her,

“You’re a stranger. You can come, but you aren’t going alone. Barnes is fucked up over me anyway.”

Apparently he isn’t the only one who isn’t having it, because Carol’s eyes narrow as she steps in front of him. Tony keeps looking right past her into the video feeds of the gym, though Barnes has escaped their view entirely (he’d even fucking that up, look at him go, great security Tony). He Rewinds and follows Barnes’ path while trying to step around Carol.

“Friday made a snide comment about my upgrades. Apparently Barnes is smarter than anyone gave him credit for. Or he’s watching me, which isn’t a thought I really want to have.”

Tony says, huffing when Carol continues to try and herd him back to his seat.

"Why would your upgrades trigger him?"

She asks, rushing to catch Tony as he dodges around her again and begins to stride down the hall.

“Because they were medically necessary after he and Rogers were done with me.”

He responds, walking even faster. Carol reaches out and yanks him to a halt though, skidding a bit as she resisted Extremis’ strength (she might have super strength, but Tony had friction on his side).

“I wasn’t allowed to see the documentation about why you won’t work with Rogers or Barnes, but this explains a lot. Look, Tony, you shouldn’t see them at all in an isolated setting.”

There’s as much strength in her words as there is in her arms. It’s a lot of strength. Carol was even buffer than Ro-

"I’m the cause of the problem!”

Tony roars, wheeling around to face her with too-blue eyes (he knows that they don’t look right, he knows that they are disconcerting, because he had to watch them in the mirror for months before he could dull the glow). Carol holds her ground with a stern face (you see? Takes no shit) and says,

“No, you aren’t. Barnes is distressed about his own actions. You are not going to go anywhere near him either, so you can’t BECOME the cause of the problem.”

He had to do something, though, didn’t he? He couldn’t just-

"You aren’t going alone.”

Tony tries, just a shade off of desperate, however, Carol gives him a dismissive look. She pulls out her phone and visibly dials Rhody (though Tony is monitoring her phone in his head, Jesus, he had to stop). Frustrated and grateful that at least someone would be there, Tony storms off.
"Mr Barnes?"

A voice far below Bucky keeps repeating. He isn’t interested in it. It floats past him like a feather on the wind. Even when it gets closer, he can’t find it in himself to care.

It’s like he’s watching himself from above, but his body is boring and doesn’t hold his attention. Nothing does, just like in the first few minutes after the chair (where he’d been scooped out and emptied, scooped out and emptied, just like every food container he’d pilfered in his youth. Useless and disappointing. Just adding to the hunger he felt).

"Sergeant?"

That was new voice. Was the first voice a Sergeant? Maybe they had a serial number...he had had one once (it rattles around in his brain in the most irritating way. He ignores it).

“Sergeant Barnes?”

The first voice says louder and closer, breaching his personal bubble of isolation. Could they fly? How else would they get up here (how did he get up here?).

A gentle gust of air comes off of voice 1 and Bucky smells something he knows. He turns his head, locking on in an instant to voice 1’s hand, which had flinched back when he shifted his focus to it. Bucky almost let the flinch take it away, almost let himself drift back into nothingness, but…

He leans forward and draws in a long breath. It smells familiar. It’s good. Nobody ever used scent cues on him when he was the soldier (no point in making him any more like a dog). Something was...different here. He wasn’t...it wasn’t...

"Tony?"

He asks, the fog in his head beginning to settle (like a thick blanket of snow. It was crushing at first, but he’d be able to walk over it soon). The hand smells familiar and good, but it also smells like somebody else. Nobody had ever used scent cues on him, but he had imagined (hallucinated) them before.

He twitches away from it (not quite right meant not quite real).

Carol and Rhodes trade an alarmed look. Barnes could smell Tony on her. She had only grabbed him for a minute at most, but Barnes could smell Tony on her. How he even knew the scent was a dangerous question (Tony had said Barnes might be watching him, but it seemed like things had gone further than that). Especially because he didn’t seem to recognize Rhodes’ scent at all.
"No, Sergeant Barnes. I’m your new field commander, Colonel Carol Danvers."

She says, tucking her hand behind her back and shivering as Barnes’ eyes track the movement.

“Oh.” he says flatly, still staring at the place he clearly knows her hand is (it’s like he can see straight through her body, like her body doesn’t matter at all to him, not even as a barrier). Barnes doesn’t say anything else and Carol shifts (her body was a wall. It was a shield. It was everything she had ever wanted it to be).

“While you are allowed to be in this space, your current state was of some concern. This gym is used for extensive training, some of which is dangerous, and you were unresponsive to prompts from Friday.”

She says, hoping for something, some reaction (she had heard Barnes was vulnerable to guilt, though she hadn’t wanted to take advantage of it). Still nothing.

“Are you alright, Sergeant Barnes? Should I be concerned? Because I am concerned, Sergeant Barnes.”

She states. Barnes blinks slowly (like a cat) and fixates on her face with alarming abruptness,

“Me and Stevie almost killed Tony, didn’t we?”

He asks. Carol honestly can’t answer that question. Her face must give Barnes something however, because he frowns.

“He did a bunch of stuff for me, though. He doesn’t want me to say thanks.”

Well, colour Carol thoroughly creeped out. She looks at Rhodes imploringly, but Rhodes looks way more uncomfortable than her (great, of course he did. Tony was his best friend, practically an extension of himself). He’s staring at Barnes like he’s grown a second equally-terrifying head.

“You should leave Tony alone.”

Rhodes says after some deliberation (or swallowing his own panic). Barnes shifts that empty cat stare to him.

“Does he think I’m not sorry? I don’t want him to think another person isn’t sorry for trying to kill him.”

Carol doesn’t want to think about how many people weren’t sorry for trying to kill Tony. Rhodes face implies the number is high (and that he wants to go home).

“Steve is so sorry that he doesn’t even know he tried to kill him.”

Barnes says and well look at the time, it’s time for Rhodes to leave this bullshit in the dust if the set of his shoulders and jaw is anything to go by (oh wow, he even had a forehead vein pop out when he got mad enough. Carol would have to remember that for…reasons).

“If Rogers can forget that, maybe you should both forget Tony completely. God knows he’s trying to forget you.”
Rhodes growls (*Carol had never heard him do that before. In other circumstances, it could be... pleasant. Now wasn’t the time, though*).

Barnes replies with,

“I don’t want to.”

Because he’s clearly more than a little off his rocker, and Rhodes’ expression gets murderous enough that Carol has to interfere.

“War Machine, return to your quarters”.

She snaps. She waits for him to leave before turning back to Barnes. He’s uncomfortably close to her hand again.

“Sergeant Barnes, I’m recommending you for psychiatric evaluation. We’re going to set you up with a therapist.”

She pauses,

“You can stay in here or return to your rooms. I’ll shut down the gym for the day.”

She isn’t sure if it’s a good decision. Carol just wants this interaction to be over.

When she leaves, she feels his eyes track her all the way to the door

Rhodey doesn’t go back to his quarters. Instead, he goes to Tony’s. He finds him pacing the room, simmering like he’s about to blow, and Rhodey pulls him into bed.

They don’t talk about what happened. If everything goes Rhodey’s way, they never will (*since when had anything gone Rhodey's way when it came to Tony? If it started storming, he has was going to scream and burn every Shakespeare play he came across*).

Chapter End Notes

Carol: *exists*
Old Avengers: *sweats*
New Avengers: *sweats ever harder*
Rhodey: *sweats the hardest because oh no she's hot*
Tony: This is Carol, I brought her in to corral me
Tony: Carol, please stop coralling me
Tony: Carol, please. Carol I'm dying. Carol. Carol, no, please-
Canto 1: Tony Astray in a Wood

Chapter Summary

Tony enters the inferno (AKA a simulation with the Old and New Avengers). It goes badly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Rogues attention fell on Tony as if it were a physical weight. It piled up, hanging like an albatross around his neck. He had thought he was ready for the first official Avengers team meeting. He hadn’t thought about everybody staring at him (except for Wanda. She was too busy gazing at Vision and hoping one day he would look back. He won’t, though. He spent all of his gazing time on the black pit his body had left in the compound floor).

Behind his sunglasses, Tony’s gaze flicks away from Wanda and finds Barnes. Barnes can’t seem to decide between watching him and watching anything but him. Both motions are painfully deliberate. The staring is intense, but so is the avoidance. No one else seems to notice, though Rhodey is very pointedly not looking at Barnes (it made Tony wonder what the actual Hell had transpired between them. He was trying not to harass Rhodey about it, but come on).

Tony resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose and directs his focus straight forwards. Unfortunately, Steve and Natasha are there. They’re both hitting him with a full dose of sad (he doesn’t know what they have to feel sad about. He doesn’t understand what they WANT or why they won’t just give up on it. It pisses him off worse than anything). He rolls his eyes, safe behind tinted lenses, and strolls up to Carol while secretly watching cat videos in his head (try making him feel sad now, suckers).

Carol introduces her plan for the day. She wants to do a massive scenario drill with Tony’s holographic equipment in the gym (mentally, he sorted through all the possible scenarios in there. There were a few really nasty ones Carol could pick if she was feeling mean). This idea had disaster written all over it, however it was a great way to get a handle on how everyone handled actual battle right now. Tony would’ve approved if Carol hadn’t wanted Tony doing surveillance.

Her plan made sense – she wanted to see how much each team would get in the other’s way and who can work around who. Live updates would be the best way to get the information she wanted.

Of course, asking for live updates was incredibly suspicious of her when he wasn’t wearing any tech. He can practically see the gears turning in the Rogues heads (he feels bile and a petty sense of satisfaction rise up in his throat because they don’t know. They don’t know how dangerous he is now. They don’t know the tricks up his sleeve so they can’t hurt him). It seemed him and Carol were going to be somewhat at odds about how many secrets Tony could keep.

Kiddy drill preparation is going on only a few feet from where the Avengers were assembled. Tony’s kids were always attentive. He should’ve known better than to let any malcontent show on his face (he did know better, but hey, he didn’t want the Rogues to think he was happy to there).
RiRi glances over at him, and, for Christssake, even though she’s supposed to be doing kiddy drills she gets this face on like she’s about to start a fight *(in her naturally acerbic and endearing way).*

“Tony!”

She whines, tugging on his sleeve is a ridiculously fake kiddy gesture *(he quirks an eyebrow at her and inwardly huffs at her quick scowl. What a brat).*

“Be my AI today, too! I can give everybody live updates - it’s good practice for me on the field!”

Carol sighs and tells RiRi to focus on training with the other kids like a fool. RiRi Williams was as stubborn as they came, hated authority, the military, and liked having Tony in her suit more than her own AI *(Veronica, though RiRi kept calling her V)*. She was also brilliant, therefore came well equipped to out-logic any adult sensibilities flung her way *(Tony was so proud).*

Clearly getting a little frustrated *(and a bit charmed – Tony knew allllll about Carol’s soft squishy core for heroic girls)*, Carol asks Tony for his thoughts. He determinedly ignores the Rogues as he admits that it’s more efficient to train RiRi in the suit as an AI, and that it shouldn’t interfere with his ability to watch over the Avengers during the sim *(Tony had more than enough room in his head these days to run multiple processes, given enough preparation).* Rhodey was fully capable of teaching the rest of the kids without him *(and from preventing them from kicking up a fuss about RiRi doing something more interesting).*

When RiRi’s cheering starts up, Tony notices the unnatural silence surrounding them. Fuck. Fucking Hell. Of course his old team was smart. They may not know the whole story *(he would make sure they never found out)*, but they had probably figured out Tony could connect with tech on some level. Tony braces himself and takes stock of the room.

Steve looks like he’s choking on something *(Tony wished he would)*. Barnes is alternating between intensely staring between him and RiRi *(RiRi stared right back just as intensely)* and gripping Steve’s shoulder in a manly show of support. Tony avoids letting his eyes rest on them and skips to Sam instead, who looks a little pale. He doesn’t even look at the rest *(he already knows what he’ll find there).*

Carol calls them all to heel *(Tony is so glad he recruited her)*. She shoos Tony off to the side and lets RiRi follow him. As the simulation starts, Tony breathes in, out, and lets his eyes shine arc reactor blue as he leans his forehead against RiRi’s armour. She cradles his head in an unexpectedly tender gesture *(she’d come a long way, hadn’t she? She was getting so much better with affection).* Tony doesn’t actually need to touch Ironheart for the uplink, but the less people know about his abilities, the better.

His focus reorients within the armour. Tony hears a gasp through the mics and, scanning the field for the source, finds all of the Rogues staring at his body’s eyes *(unnatural, disconcerting, and bright enough to shine through his sunglasses).* Tony shrugs off his sense of unease and tells RiRi to find what she thinks is the best vantage point to begin the battle in. It’s an old lesson, but one she still struggles with - establishing possibilities where no pattern exists yet *(tactics aren’t really a thing for her yet, though he can tell they will be in the future).*

One flying leap directs RiRi to a spot that gives a good view of the battlefield. It conceals her body from the back, however, Tony has to gently nudge her to find the flaws in her choice *(there’s a major blind spot over one of the primary escape routes from the “city” that’s being simulated).* RiRi grumbles that she hadn’t looked there yet and Tony reminds her that that’s what her AI is for *(to see
what she hadn’t seen yet, to be her co-pilot).

Carol radios in her approval when RiRi shifts to a better spot (which RiRi bitches about under her breath. God, this kid and the military. It was hysterical watching her try to logic out why Rhodey was ok but everyone else sucked). There was another spot that was even better, but before Tony can even think of directing RiRi there, he takes notice of Barnes on the cameras. Of course the sharpshooter has already taken it over. Though…Tony had expected him to enter the fray (despite his lack of a metal arm, Barnes was still a tank).

A sniper position was a bold choice for someone who didn’t even know what the goal of the simulation was yet. Though Barnes probably had some suspicions given how little information they were provided (Tony’s mind wandered to how Hydra probably used to train annmnd nope. No. Not going there).

The scenario began as several buildings caught on fire all over the city. Each building was at least a kilometer from the last, making fire containment a difficult challenge. RiRi, in a knee jerk reaction to the more realistic adult scenarios, started to move to the closest flaming building. Quickly, Tony reminded her that her role was only surveillance. RiRi returned to her position, ready to take in the entire field, though she was cursing under her breath (Tony was going to tattle to her mother. Honestly, she’d gotten so rude lately. Was it his influence? It probably was-).

RiRi delivers the co-ordinates of each building to the New Avengers and begins to catalogue escape routes out of the city. Carol hadn’t said that she couldn’t help them, so Tony lets it slide. Carol signals her approval seconds later, so it seemed like RiRi had successfully joined their exercise (Tony would need to fill her in on how sneaky children can be later).

Jessica and Luke quickly divide into two teams to deal with fire rescue and blocking escape routes from the city. They wait while RiRi “contacts” the local authorities for evacuation and road-blocks entering the area. Tony is proud of her for thinking of civilian methods so quickly, but she’s being too focused on the city as a whole without looking at the moving parts of it. Tony lights up her HUD with the locations of the Rogues and their movements, along with the heat signatures of the fire victims (he remembers the first time he’d swept in as Iron Man. How J had had to constantly remind him of his surroundings, of all the things that hadn’t been his goal but should’ve been, all the people who could’ve been caught in the crossfire).

The vitals of one fire victim are quickly decreasing (Tony makes them flash red with a health bar) and Tony allows RiRi to make her own decision about what to do without guidance. Being RiRi, she quickly asks who is closest to that building and suggests formulating a more advanced strategy while they are all on the move. He’s happy that she continuously prioritizes individuals over grander plans.

As the battle spreads out, RiRi begins to circle. The cause of the fires hasn’t been determined yet and it has become her priority to pick up the pieces of the puzzle. Tony approves when she finally begins to use him appropriately:

“Tony, can you sort through the camera feeds and find the source of the fire?”

With that, it’s on. He can do more now than guide her flight and give her statistics. Quickly, they find that the blazes are from a widespread electrical fire. It was started by a surge bomb (Tony remembers this scenario now. It seemed that Carol had changed some of the parameters, but Tony was beginning to figure out what she’d done). Tony can see all the statistics flitting past and how each well-protected building (ones that were up to current New York code) didn’t catch fire. It made
the pattern look random when it wasn’t *(Tony realizes he could turn on the sprinklers in every building and could most likely increase their water pressure enough to put out most of the fires, but doesn’t say anything. This was RiRi’s show).*

With confirmation of the presence of a bomb, the New Avengers now have a villain or team of villains to look for. Tony scans the field and recognizes the pattern the Rogues are entering: a sweep search. However, upon checking, their search overlaps in awkward places with the New Avengers. It isn’t problematic now, but it is slow. He makes a map for RiRi and nudges her to view it, while also sending the information to Carol.

Abruptly, like Carol had been waiting for it, a hostage situation begins *(yep, Tony had called it. Of course Carol would pull something this classic).* Worse, two of the buildings are cut off from potential aid by a series of exploding cars. RiRi hadn’t asked Tony to check for another bomb, too busy directing the New Avengers to the hostages.

She growls, but Tony calmly advises her that she has access to several invulnerable individuals. They can still reach the hostages in the building. She finishes his plan for him: she can then aerially collect them *(so could Sam, but Tony wasn’t going to give away Carol’s test now)*.

RiRi radios Luke and Vision, who had been organizing rescue on the ground, and confirms their plan to enter the building. She then asks Matt to report any usual frequencies he hears in any of the buildings. Vision chimes in with a request that he forward them to him so he can counteract their action. It’s a good group strategy for bomb location that’s probably more effective than relying on Tony.

Hope speaks up over the coms to report that she’s going to enter the hostage building after getting an electronic surveillance clear. Tony chides her *(fondly, always fondly with Hope)* that using him that way right now is cheating. He tells her she’ll have to use the alternatives RiRi’s regular AI could provide or come up with some other solution. The second he says it, he can almost feel both women bridling at the challenge. But then responsibility takes over and Tony’s heart swells with pride as RiRi says she’ll be busy getting people clear of the fire with Vision, so she’s a no go if Hope wanted to act fast.

Hope goes to say something, however a fight abruptly breaks out in the building she had been lurking at and an explosion blows her tiny wasp form back *(Tony tracks the trajectory and force nervously, though he knows Hope is sturdy)*. The explosion is contained in a wave of red *(nothing like the hot rod red in Ironheart and everything like the red of blood)* and directed upwards, where it buffets RiRi’s flight path *(alerts flare up in the suit and Tony quickly begins the process of stabilizing them all)*.

Angrily, RiRI directs herself towards the building despite Tony’s clear counsel not to *(he’d called her Icarus, a little projection of his own face frowning at her)*. She doesn’t get far before another wave of red *(like the Red Sea, Tony thinks somewhat hysterically. Wanda was a bit like a biblical plague)* sucks in the energy from the flames and electronics around them.

It also pulls in the energy, however briefly, from RiRi’s suit and ejects Tony as her AI.

And that’s where it all goes to shit *(they had flown too close to the sun)*.

Part of Tony can still hear the wind rushing in his ears from RiRi’s dive even as he snaps back into his own body. He latches onto the com in his ear, trying to use it to jump back into the suit, but he is stymied by something that he knew would be added to his menagerie of nightmares forever.
RiRi wails his name in fury and panic. She sounds anguished (her voice tearing at his ears and his heart and his very soul). Her suit stands out starkly against the pale colours of the training room as the simulation flickers threateningly. RiRi doesn’t even notice – she seems to have briefly forgotten its a simulation at all.

She’s headed right for the building that must contain Wanda and Tony can only sense bad things in the future if she’s allowed to reach it (“What is dark within me…”).

Standing, Tony reaches out with his mind and shuts down the whole simulation, grasping onto RiRi’s suit past Veronica’s startled attempt to reintegrate herself, and pulling his own suit out of his bones (“Illuminate!”).

”Stand down!”

He roars through all of the speakers, bringing her flight to a halt as he enters the field. He hears her begin to apologize, but shuts off the com (he was so sorry but he couldn’t - he couldn’t - her voice-) as he pulls her out of the sky and to his side. He retracts the suit around his fingers and clutches onto her hand (“Illuminate!”).

“It’s alright, RiRi.”

He says through gritted teeth when her panicked vitals flash before his eyes.

“IT’s ok, I just don’t want to hear you apologize right now. I’m not in a very good place to hear it.”

Everything about this mistake was clawing at Tony’s memories of Lagos. A child, falling, a building burning, Wanda at the root of it all, everything being Tony’s fault – it was unraveling him a bit at the edges (“Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost”). RiRi’s anguished reaction just added another layer of… bad. Bad thoughts. Bad feelings. It was (“Lasciate ogni speranza, o voi ch’entrate”)-

Friday nudges Tony’s mind (peach-pink and friendly, always ready to act for him) and simultaneously alerts Rhodey of Tony’s current state. Her concern keeps Tony in the moment (not in the past).

”Everyone, assemble.”

Tony orders over all of the coms. When nobody but his team moves, he smooths out the radio frequency so he’s right up in everybody’s business (intimate and deadly) and hisses out,

“Right. Now.”

As everyone slowly trickles out from their cover, Tony signals Carol.

“Ms Marvel will debrief you now.”

He says stiffly, Bleeding Edge rippling over his skin as he unlocks the faceplate by force (the suit resisted him, following his much baser biological urges. It was a kink he still hadn’t managed to work out). He was going to leave the rest on - Extremis was acting up, despite Tony’s decent control he wasn’t sure what kind of lightshow he was going to be right now or what conclusions anyone would draw from it.
Carol looks at him, assessing, and Tony meets her gaze head on.

"I was kicked out of RiRi’s armour.”

He says, flat and neutral and not at all how he’s feeling (his eyes are blue, so blue they burn, shining straight through the contacts and the sunglasses he’s been wearing).

“There was a power drain and then surge. Her suit wasn’t designed to handle it and I was focused on correcting her flight path, since the explosion being redirected nearly knocked her out of the sky.”

Carol looks at RiRi, waiting for a report, but RiRi doesn’t know military obedience yet and was visibly rattled (she might be a brat, but she was Tony’s brat, so there was no way she was ignoring Carol on purpose). Tony lets Bleeding Edge slide off of his forearms and wraps them around her, cradling her head against his chest even as she fights him (she was doing well with physical affection, but it still didn’t come naturally. She always had to think about it).

"She’s never been cut off from me like that. She probably thought I needed help.”

He hedges, not wanting to set her off (he knew there was more to this. He could still remember the last time she exploded at him), but RiRi whispers,

“I thought you were dead.”

And all the enhanced people hear it (Tony knows they do because he’s still in their coms, whether he wants to be or not, and he can feel the way their pulse hammers against the fine electronics and their breathing stutters). RiRi pushes Tony away and rushes off the field, taking to the air the second she gets the door open (Tony had always wanted to fly, too. Every single time he felt trapped, he had wanted to…).

"Veronica, keep an eye on her.”

He requests to the open air, knowing his command will be relayed to the Ironheart armour. Tony squeezes his eyes shut, then squints at Carol, feeling a thousand years older as he says,

“I’ll speak to her about this and she’ll have a proper debrief with you later.”

He drops a line to RiRi’s mother in the back of his mind while he’s at it (she was not going to be happy about this. Tony should have known that he’d lose her trust sooner rather than later). The Rogues openly gawk at him. He can’t tell if it’s the armour sliding out of his skin or the way RiRi had responded to everything or something else entirely. He glares at them, a clear challenge in his expression, when Bucky Barnes abruptly averts his eyes in shame (somehow it pissed Tony off worse that the only person with manners was Barnes).

Carol sighs, and looks at Tony in a way that implies they’ll be having words later (Carol’s first few days at work had been a disaster. Tony owed her so much. Too much). It’s fair, but God he doesn’t want to. He wants to fly out of the compound next to his kid (not his kid) and triangulate a path to California that takes her through all the scenic routes. Unfortunately, he was going to have debrief instead.

At least he wasn’t the only one about to get roasted.
“What on Earth were you thinking?”

Carol says, pulling open a holographic screen and replaying the red energy explosion.

“This,” she points at it,

“Shows complete and total disregard for any other combatants on the field. It was dangerous. It didn’t account at all for aerial support, which was very obviously Ironheart’s role on the field and also Falcon’s and Wasp’s, and placed no thought into the source of the fires. An electrical surge like that could have started more fires. In fact, it should’ve.”

Carol turns her gaze on Tony.

“I understand why you halted the simulation, however you shouldn’t have cushioned the surge. It makes my point difficult to illustrate.”

Tony nods stiffly and unhappily, not telling her he had been briefly worried the surge would carry to the rest of the compound (he had designed this training room, but had never really accounted for Wanda’s powers. He had never known what she was capable of).

Carol rewinds to the moment RiRi was shoved off centre and then zooms in on Hope being blown away (Tony retraces her trajectory in his mind again and again).

“When making such a sweeping change to any battlefield, you should report your intentions and their scale. You didn’t even alert your own team beyond saying you would contain both the blast and your enemies. We will speak about this personally.”

Wanda looks upset, though there’s guilt in her eyes when she looks at Hope. As the footage loops again though, she points out RiRi’s dive.

“Stark’s little Soldier was going to kill me.”

Wanda says, and she sounds oddly triumphant, like it would help her out of this situation at all (like it absolved her of wrongdoing against RiRi. She’d never be ‘Stark’s little soldier’. Wanda could fuck right off with that – RiRi hated that shit).

Carol answers her with,

“Ironheart responded poorly and Mr Stark, as her primary instructor, will be discussing it with her, as will I. She is only 15, however, and is largely noncombatant. She was cleared for a simulation, not for the a situation in which she thought her mentor had been killed.”

Both Bucky and Steve flinch as Carol says the damning words (words Tony didn’t but did but didn’t want to hear hear hear not in front of them-),

“Her response was completely normal and does not speak in any way of her quality as a human being. She thought someone she loved had died and she saw the source of that death in front of her. She is trained to fight in a situation like that. However, Mr Stark subdued her before harm could be done, as is his responsibility. I consider the situation resolved”

”So you’re on his side.”
Wanda says, apropos of nothing, and Tony wonders why he even showed up for this simulation. He wonders why he didn’t scream and cry and do everything he could to keep these dipshits out of the States. Wanda had lost her childhood, had been absolved of personal responsibility by Hydra and by a killer robot, and, though it explained her actions, it didn’t make them tolerable (his therapist’s words circled in his head, her soothing tone filing away at all the rough edges of his thoughts).

Hope frowns and speaks up,

“Ironheart is a woman, not a 'he', and there are no sides here. She’s a superhero in training for a reason. I’m sure she’s sorry that she tried to attack you, but to be fair, you attacked her first.”

Bless Hope's heart. Tony forgot at how good she was at intentionally misreading subtext. Trickling people into saying exactly what they mean was basically her hobby, but she kept it so subtle that even Tony forgot about it sometimes.

Wanda goes to say something else, but Carol pins both her and Hope with one Hell of a look (Tony was tempted to attach a trademark to it. The Look TM. Her and Rhodey could share royalties).

“Ironheart will face disciplinary action, irregardless of your concern, though it is not my place to carry it out. Mr Stark and Mr Rhodes will.”

And when Wanda begins to protest again,

“Frankly, it's none of your business. This experience has taught me not to bring the children anywhere near this mess again.”

Clint is grinding his teeth, but he’s too much of a professional to try and disagree. Nothing Carol was saying was unfair (besides, she was the boss. Tony knew the Clint had obeyed Fury in times he hadn’t wanted to. Had trusted him both as an authority figure and a person).

Carol rewinds the footage further to when the Avengers first spread out.

“Both teams failed to communicate. This was what I was most concerned about, therefore I set up an exercise where you would HAVE to talk eventually. However, it was shut down before the loss of lives would have been inevitable.”

She focuses the footage onto the maps Tony had sent her.

"Despite that, many of your positions overlapped. Many of your roles could have been complimentary."

She begins to point out strategies that could have been employed, shaming both Luke and Steve as leaders (Luke’s eye twitched like mad, but he took it all like a champion. Tony wouldn’t look at Steve to see what his reaction was).

“The only people who made any attempt to communicate across teams were Mr Barnes and Falcon. Mr Barnes was listening to Ironheart’s aerial reports and was covering her blind spots, though he failed to inform her of this. However, Mr Barnes failed to communicate with anyone, so I have chosen to take this as more than an interpersonal issue. Falcon offered assistance to Mr Cage and Miss Jones for rescuing those at risk of burning. However, Miss Jones turned off her com while he was speaking.”
Tony sends the world's most withering look at Jess while Matt snickers. He's trying to ignore the screaming in the back of his head at the idea of Barnes covering RiRi's back (when had he accessed the coms? Why hadn't Tony noticed? Was he really so far off of Tony's radar that he could miss a threat like that?).

"Captain America discussed more than one strategy with his team that was dependent on aerial support more suited to Ironheart than Falcon. This support could have been supplemented by Mr Barnes vantage points, though Hawkeye was engaged in battle, but this was not done either."

Carol flicks to a moment in the hostage situation where Natasha was creeping around the back of the building and passing a note to the hostages.

"Black Widow is the most experienced with hostages and should have been deferred to. Her plan accounted for Barnes and Ironheart, as well as the possibility of being assisted by least one invulnerable person. She had messages prepared for sending once she determined whether or not she could reach and untie a single hostage. However, she lost control of the situation through hasty action on your parts."

Carol gestured broadly at Wanda, Clint, and Steve, though she also sent a withering look to the New Avengers (probably keeping them in their place. There was no favouritism here, something Tony was both grateful for and regretted)."Ultimately, the Avengers need to establish a chain of command that covers a variety of scenarios. Too many of you act alone or with little argument. The New Avengers need to take advantage of other combatants on the field and be less reliant on aerial surveillance. Mr Cage, you under utilized both Daredevil and Wasp. Both of them could have found the source of the fires by the time Ironheart provided those results."

Carol pulled up more of Tony's data, throwing it all together into annotations of everyone's projected movements and possible integrated team solutions to the problems they encountered.

"Neither of your teams can work together. This will be remedied before I place you in another high stress simulation. I didn't realize how much work you would all need when I stepped onto the field today."

Finally, after letting that settle, Carol claps her hands.

"Does anyone have any insight as to the events of today?"

Nobody says anything, too aware of the powderkeg they were sitting in right now (Tony was pretty sure if any of the Rogues said shit all, his team would maul them like dogs). Relations between the two teams were too volatile to test.

"Mr Stark,"

Carol says,

"With me, please."
Seeing Tony’s eyes literally glow made Bucky’s heart rabbit in his chest. He had known, he knew that something was unnatural about the man, but this was more than he expected. He was still reeling from the previous day (dissociation was a bitch and he was pretty sure Colonel Danvers and Rhodes hated him), so dealing with a revelation like this right before a simulation was doing a number on him.

Bucky can just barely hear Tony’s voice in Ironhearts suit and isn’t that just the craziest fucking thing. He was running that suit, teaching the girl on the wing. It was like nothing Bucky had ever seen (fascinating, drawing up memories of sci-fi paperbacks that he’d dug out of the trash on the run and...before). Shuri’s lab had come close, but she had never cared for AI, not like this. Fascinating and...dangerous. Extremely dangerous.

Seeing Tony, up close and in person, was a beast of a different colour. It was almost more shocking than his upgrades. Bucky had gotten used to the idea of the man (a three piece suit, a smirk firmly in place, or anguished eyes and a violent set to armoured shoulders) more than the reality. Tony looked healthy, but something roiled in Bucky’s gut nonetheless (yesterday he had thought too deeply of death to shrug it off in the face of a healthy complexion). He lets himself sink into the battle to forget.

Bucky hated forgetting. He was also an idiot, so he’d naturally tuned into Ironheart’s frequency. He justified it to himself in that her view covered places his could not. However, he kept listening even when she wasn’t relaying information of value. He could pick out pauses in her speech, a lack of confidence in some of the words, that told him that she was being tested. Instructed.

Bucky could tell she enjoyed it. She was a feisty kid and he found himself hoping she would do well. He also found himself hoping she would leave her back open less frequently (just like Stevie, never protecting the back of his head). He guarded her from his sniper’s nest and easily began picking out patterns in the battlefield with her chatter in his ear. He’d almost been enjoying himself.

Then she had screamed out Tony’s name like a wild thing, right into Bucky’s ear. His entire self had slipped sideways, like flesh that’s finally given up to the rot and peels straight off the bone. Something ugly and animal had rammed itself against the inside of his skull, impatient and desperate to get out (hungry for blood). Bucky had turned his gun and trained his sight on Wanda straight through the building’s cover in less than a second. He had lined up the shot, he had squeezed the first third of the trigger with absolute silence in his head for the first time since he’d walked away from Hydra, before a roar made the battlefield crumble around him.

While the simulation ground to a halt, Bucky had had a panic attack in his watchtower (just out of sight of every camera, for several long moments in private). He didn’t regret the action he’d taken. He couldn’t regret it because he was a machine and a tool and he had placed himself into somebody’s hands in an effort to say thank you and wasn’t that just the most fucked up thing.

When he manages to come down, Bucky can’t look at Tony Stark (he’d gotten too close, too familiar, what had he been thinking when it came to Tony Tony Tony). He can’t stop the feeling that he had, even if it was just for a second, placed himself in Stark’s hands and said,

“Use me”.

Stark hadn’t wanted that. He hadn’t wanted him. The rejection stung him even though it didn’t make a damn bit of sense (Bucky didn’t want to be used, right?).
Bucky doesn’t want to look at Tony Stark, though he can’t entirely look away when armour ripples into Tony’s skin and he embraces Ironheart. There’s naked affection in his eyes (that Bucky had never seen - it’s entrancing) and then...

"I thought you were dead."

Hits Bucky like a sledgehammer because, for a moment, so had Bucky. He had thought Tony was gone. And that had been…important to him. More than it should have been.

It’s enough to make Bucky look away again. The second he gets the chance, Bucky escapes the simulation room. The entire meeting had been a blur. Once he’s alone, settled in a room painted arc reactor blue, he settles into the depression in the floor.

He stakes out the door for the long night ahead (nobody was going to get their hands on him tonight).

Chapter End Notes

Tony: *has a good time flying around with his daughter*
Bucky: Beautiful, gorgeous, good post
Tony: *suddenly ejected from the armour*
RiRi: *screaming*
Bucky: Bad post OP
Bucky: *hefts gun*
Bucky: Blocked.

Notes here are a reference to Dante's Inferno. The Italian is essentially "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here", which is written on the gates of Hell. There's really no turning back for anyone anymore!

The real Bucky-heavy chapter is coming next. I'm sooOOOOo very happy to have the chance to start clearing up some questions about his motivations etc. and for the real Bucky Barnes to start rearing his head.

EDIT: Bleeding Edge is the armour Tony gets with Extremis. He stores it in his bones and can call it out on command!
Chapter Summary

Tony turns into Ms. Frizzle, Bucky Barnes looks in the mirror a whole bunch, and Carol gives Steve a new title (if only in her head).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Since Carol had implemented a “no kids allowed” rule and Tony’s presence was deemed “too volatile” (he knew Carol wasn’t saying any of this was his fault, but it felt like she was), Tony was focusing on training the kids far far away from the integrated Avengers. He missed the New Avengers (throwing Jess around the field, Luke always being there to catch her, Hope and Matt laughing while Strange popped in and out of existence…fucking magic).

He caught snippets of their affairs through the grapevine (speaking to all of his maintenance robots): every simulation was a disaster.

Barnes didn’t talk, then talked even less when Carol got him a therapist.

Wanda continued to show no progress after classes on control with Stephen Strange and Carol was at a loss (“It’s like she doesn’t care!” Carol had complained to him one night, before slapping her hands down on the table and pushing herself upright. “I can’t be complaining to you. I can’t have any bias here.”). Strange had implemented a block on her touching people’s minds until she displayed appropriate respect. Carol would have included Wanda with the kids if she hadn’t thought Wanda would hurt them, but she was showing some disturbing behavioral patterns in relation to Tony (concerning enough that Tony’s therapist had been alerted to watch him for signs of abnormal behavior. That had been one Hell of a conversation. Tony didn’t think he’d ever seen that woman angry before).

St- Rogers was morose and refused to reach out. His isolation wasn’t Tony’s concern, though (no matter how often isolation seemed like a theme of his that Tony could relate a little too well to).

Sam was doing well. Natasha was somewhat adrift from Steve’s leadership. Clint was beginning to work with her again (there were still tendrils of fondness for Natasha in Tony’s heart. Her betrayals were never personal. They were always based on trying to reduce damage and Tony could respect that. He was almost…happy for her. Almost).

The New Avengers were largely disinterested in collaboration, though Hope showed some promise with Natasha and Luke was willing to work with Sam. Both Jess and Matt were determined to work around them (both of them had plenty of opinions on people who didn’t own up to their mistakes, though Matt was much quieter about it), while Strange was largely occupied with Wanda and Vision was occupied with avoiding Wanda (he lurked around the zen garden too often lately. Tony wished he had time to go to him, but at least Vision had Friday).

Eventually, the bad news gets to be too much. Tony sends Rhodey out to assist Carol with true
military efficiency. The training of the kids would suffer with just Tony, but the Avengers needed to be in fighting form for anything larger than the single-team missions that the New Avengers were cleared for. The Rogues still weren’t even allowed on the field, for Christssake.

Soon they would have to do charity benefits and public appearances that wouldn’t work while they were visibly miserable, either. Barnes and Rogers were perhaps the biggest public figures of the era, and Tony, when he actually let himself think about it, was genuinely worried he’d find one of them with a gun in their mouth at some point. He had thought they would be happy to have each other. He had thought everyone was perfectly content without him. He…he didn’t want to think about it too deeply (Friday whisked his mind away onto project after project for the kids).

Without Rhodey or Vision by his side, Tony finds himself getting anxious more often despite the time he spends with the kids (or how often Friday pokes at him with fledgling humour and concern). He’s worried about the kids’ future. He’s worried about what kind of leadership they’ll be stepping out under. He’s worried about how many small missions the New Avengers keep being sent on, the strain it was putting on them top of training with the Rogues (Hope especially looked worn. She also had a corporation to run. He knew that Jess was drinking more often, too, with Luke right behind her). He should be in the field.

Tony should be in the field. He should be in the field.

He couldn’t be there, though. He couldn’t.

Pepper calls him about a fire at a server farm in LA and Tony immediately submits a request for leave to the Accords council. They approve immediately, partially because he’s not an active avenger at the moment, partially because Tony’s contract is very free outside of emergencies (his lawyers had gouged the original contract until only teeny little bits of it were left).

Tony’s kids (not his kids) like tech. They like the world. They want to solve world issues, right? He could take them on a field trip. That was a thing responsible adults did, right (Tony wouldn’t know. He could never remember going on one)?

Tony brushes his mind against Friday, resisting the temptation to recoil as her vast attention turns towards him.

“Hey there, baby girl.”

He says (the full weight of his attention warming her from the very first letter of her code to the last – a stark contrast to his own reaction. His girl was too good to him),

“Want to go on a field trip?”

Flying again after so long mostly grounded is…it’s better than Tony ever remembered it. It’s everything. He feels right in his own skin (free).

It’s incredible (he had nearly lost it so many times. But, “You will burn and you will burn out; you will be healed and come back again.” He wasn’t done yet. He would never be done).

He would have to keep the footage for Rhodey later. He wanted his oldest friend to see the way the waves sparkled and the world disappeared in a blur (he wanted Rhodey to remember and one day...
The first thing that Bucky’s therapist points out when he comes in for his session (his mandatory session...so much for ‘choices’) is that Tony is gone. Bucky already knows that. He’s worried sick about that. He doesn’t want her to know how he feels, though (it was just another way things were falling apart. He was sick of trying to discuss it).

He had tried to talk to her about the subjects he knew best: how fighting with Steve was natural, how filling in the gaps in a team was natural, but none of it made sense (words were always slipping away from him like his memories used to. Like how they still did, sometimes). It sounded like the only thing that came naturally to him was violence. It made it sound like he wanted this (whatever this was). But he wasn’t doing what he wanted to do and it was frustrating in ways he couldn’t name. He didn’t know WHAT he wanted to do.

Carol wanted him to make choices consciously on the field and Bucky didn’t know how to do that. His therapist wanted him to make purposeful (“meaningful”, whatever that meant) decisions about his feelings. Steve wanted him to choose to be somebody who could be there for him, even though he didn’t want to see the Winter Soldier kill on the field. Everybody wanted him to think, but nobody wanted him to profile or plan their untimely demise.

Bucky had been numb for a long time (Winter all the way down to his bones). Then, once the numbness faded, he was scared (every single thing in the world was an enemy, though none of it deserved the fate he would bring down upon it). But quickly, very quickly, he was becoming crushingly angry.

Everybody wanted him to express it. They wanted to see. They wanted all of Bucky’s feeling laid out on a table for them to dissect. But nobody wanted to see the Winter Soldier in a full tilt rage. That was how people died (more than once he’d been shocked within an inch of his life - one inch too short to keep him in line. He’d killed so many technicians. He’d chewed through a handler’s arm. He had shattered his own bones and used shards to-).

Bucky didn’t know how to do anything halfway right now (had he ever? He couldn’t remember). His therapist told him he didn’t need to follow Steve forever, but what else would he ever do? She said he didn’t need to continue to watch Natalia (Natasha, Tasha, Little Spider) for weaknesses, to try and erase them (to teach her), but what else would he ever do? What else was he meant for?

Bucky had never wanted much in life - had never been allowed to - and he just...took everything given to him like a stray dog. Snapping up scraps of lives that would never be his. She didn’t UNDERSTAND. She didn’t understand that Bucky Barnes had always been a desperate hungry thing, even when he’d kept his teeth tucked behind lips that spilled good humour and seduction and distraction. He’d always taken things - sex, violence, attention. He’d never given them back in equal measure.

There was a reason Hydra had used him. There was a reason they had been able to twist him into a tool.

As a child, he’d pulled Steve Rogers out of a fight because he thought there wasn’t any point in wailing on someone weaker. He had thought the bullies’ actions were empty and pathetic. Steve
Rogers, hissing and spitting on the ground, was much more interesting than they’d ever be. Then he kept pulling him free because he’d found somebody worth something in a place full of nothing. Somebody smart, somebody angry, somebody just as hungry as he was.

As a teenager, he picked up girls and put them down because he’d been hungry for it. Hungry for something more, hungry to learn, hungry to pleasure. He always left them satisfied (his mouth dripping, his fingers wet and sticky, long scratches down his back carving out his partner’s desire) but he always wanted more (to sink back in, to hear them scream his name again). He just tucked it all behind his teeth and tongue and made it fit underneath his skin (“Come ’ere, darlin’. Let me take care of you.” He’d croon, luring them in with a flicker of what he could be in the curve of his mouth, “I’ll make you forget any other man you’ve met.”).

As a young man, he avoided the war until the draft because it was pointless. He wasn’t willing to fight for something worth less than half as goddamn much as Stevie. War emptied people out and Bucky was always trying to be filled. He hadn’t wanted to go (he’d considered, for several long moments, being a draft dodger. But Bucky knew how to calculate his odds and his odds weren’t good).

As a soldier, he’d climbed the ranks as a sniper because it brought the hunger, that focus, that need to collect and dig into information to heel. It obeyed like a good dog. Every single kill emptied him out (another life, another possibility, snuffed out of existence) but if he didn’t shoot, one of his people would die (they were worth protecting. They were worth loyalty, that damned specter Bucky could never shake). He fucked service men and women and tried to breathe life into them (a payment, a penance for every time his finger squeezed the trigger), but the emptiness in them all never filled up to quite the same level (“I feel good, sweetheart.” They’d always say, but they were never quite as vibrant as they once were).

Eventually, Hydra picked him up and saw that he was empty. They’d joked about him being a changeling (isolating him from the others, making them fear him as much as their captors. Except for the Howlies…the Howlies never let him down). The other men prayed for God, for their families, for absolution from their sins during torture. Bucky just recited his serial and prayed for something more. He thought of his little sister’s face and prayed for something more. He thought of his rifle and his troop and he prayed for something more. Then, when they had him strapped to the table and serum pumping into his veins, he thought of Steve and, for the very first time, prayed for something more there too.

And then he became something more. And less. So much less (hungrier and hungrier).

They’d just begun to condition him (like a dog, always like a damn dog, but Bucky was never obedient or willing). They were trying to draw out certain traits with the serum, pulling on his loyalty, tugging his focus, nudging at his desire to be more. Hydra pressed against the empty space in his head he fled to with every death he caused. And then, Steve came for him.

In his last few days as Bucky Barnes, he’d followed Steve into battle both for revenge and to keep him safe (for loyalty). Steve had become something more, too, and Bucky had wanted it to be enough. He had wanted to fill the gaps with Steve, but instead he filled his empty spaces with blood and righteous fury.

It was a mistake.

The Winter Soldier was Bucky Barnes but more...and less. Hungry for success, to change the world,
to satisfy. Desperate to never be emptied out (every time his morals scraped themselves out from the dirt, every time his desire for independence, his loathing of being used without permission reared its head, he was emptied. Being emptied was worse than anything else; the sensory deprivation, the electro shocks, the cryotube...they were Hell. Every time he came out of them, he came out hungrier). Ready to be filled with blood and righteous fury.

Nobody understood. Not Natasha (so vulnerable to love, so ready to create good in the world). Not even Steve, though Bucky thought there were times he came close (bringing down the plane instead of trying anything else, going after Bucky alone, trying so desperately to get Bucky back - those were the actions of an empty man. And the way that Steve kept him now, barely sated with a monster by his side, told Bucky that Steve was just as hungry as he’d ever been).

Him and Steve...they’d never be satisfied. Nothing would ever be enough and nobody ever saw it. They saw the drive to do more and attributed it to some inherent goodness. And maybe for Stevie - maybe for him that was correct. But for Bucky? Goodness never had anything to do with it, no matter how many memories he had of empathy and kindness (he’d done too much ill to ever be forgiven).

Now Tony Stark wanted more. Became more. Bucky was terrified of what would happen to him next.

And,

At the same time,

**He wanted to consume him.**

_________

Stewing in her own thoughts for days hadn’t done much good for Carol. It had made her feel slightly sick, though she knew her enhanced body was pretty much invulnerable to illness. She couldn’t avoid a certain conversation any longer (she was ashamed she’d put it off for as long as she had).

Steve’s room is pretty much as far away as possible from Carol’s. The walk over there gives her anxiety plenty of time to build. Steve was never willing to talk about Bucky to anyone who wasn’t going to sing his praises. At least, that’s the impression the New Avengers had given her (and they hated Steve with a passion, so perhaps they were wrong).

It’s a little surprising to Carol when Steve seems pretty happy to see her, though she’s beginning to learn that Steve Rogers is full of bullshit and misery. He’s mostly polite and genial on the surface, sometimes delighted by the mere prospect of company, but that wasn’t what was really going on in his head. Carol had seen how he stares after Tony (like the man was a ghost) and knew he still couldn’t make direct eye contact with Rhodes. As much shame as Steve felt (and shame was clearly the emotion he’d been trying to strangle), he still didn’t apologize. Thus: bullshit and misery.

Thus, the second reason she was there.

Fast and brutal, Carol sits him down and tells him that Bucky has made no progress (less than no progress) in therapy because he won’t talk about anything. She also points out that, though Bucky’s sessions were confidential, his therapist was concerned enough to speak to her about his rather
blatant fixation on Tony. Which Carol herself had noticed (so had half the compound, though Steve didn’t need to hear that).

Steve’s facial expression goes stony and Carol squares up (polite and genial on the surface, but Steve was always ready to get mad. Everything was a fight with him).

“You can’t say you haven’t noticed.”

She calls him out,

“Half the time we are running simulations, he’s tracking Tony’s location with the kids. He didn’t even notice when I asked him for Tony’s exact co-ordinates and he provided it mid-battle!”

Steve’s expression doesn’t budge at all and his jaw is straining no matter how loose the rest of his posture was (she knew Steve was a good man, as good as they came in some respects, but his misery had the potential to make him mean. Carol wanted to chop that out at the root).

“How bout you try this one on for size?”

Carol says, a dangerous set to her shoulders (meant to match his exactly),

”He can identify Tony by scent alone. He had a break down awhile back, tracked my hand the whole time, wouldn’t look away from it for even a second, after I’d been touching Tony with it.”

Steve finally winces at that, red creeping up his neck (it made him look boyish and likable. Carol could see how so many people simply gave up their anger in the face of this).

“That’s...not that unusual.”

He mumbles, which just, what was he on about (????????!!??!). Carol fixes him with the most bewildered expression she can conjure up and Steve glances away. His hands half cover his mouth as he continues mumbling,

“Tony smells nice. Uh, good? It wasn’t a thing I would have noticed before the serum, but after...”

Carol squints at him and repeats (just to make sure she wasn’t having a stroke):

“Tony smells good.”

The red works its way up the rest of Steve’s face.

“Don’t other people smell good? That doesn’t justify Barnes picking it up, somehow without any contact, and it doesn’t justify the clear fixation he had.”

Carol settles on saying, wondering why on Earth supersoldiers were so...disturbing (she had enhanced senses, too. She didn’t go around sniffing people though!!). Steve inhales deeply and then choke a little bit halfway through (was he...was he sniffing her? He’d better not be. Had Carol been touching Tony today? Was that going to be a thing???). Carol subtly steps back from him.

“It’s not actually that common. It’s a particular kind of good? It’s...uh, well, it’s hard to forget.”

He says with an air of ’Tony is hard to forget' that Carol doesn’t want to examine too closely (not
with all this near-murder, seething hatred, and political SNAFUs lurking in that thought).

“Alright.”

She concedes,

“That still doesn’t resolve the most important issue: the fixation Barnes has developed on it. It’s concerning.”

Steve’s face briefly twitches to anger and Carol can hear him counting under his breath (that right there was why Steve Rogers was still here. He was trying his best, no matter how much the anger and the misery ate at him). Finally, he says,

“Bucky has always been like this, a little. I mean, not as obviously as he is now, but the uh...”

He waves a hand as if that was an explanation of literally anything (it wasn’t. It really wasn’t),

“Is the same. He wants to apologize to Tony and thank him. He’s stuck on it.”

And then Steve Rogers has the gall to look at her hopefully.

“He’s not getting within 10 feet of Tony as long as he keeps staring at him like he’s been possessed by a demon. Tony doesn’t want Barnes anywhere near him either.”

Steve’s fists clench and so does his jaw (how had he not ground his teeth to powder? Carol was genuinely curious).

“Why can’t he just-“

He starts, but Carol cuts him off.

“Because Mr Stark doesn’t owe Mr Barnes anything. Because Mr Stark is allowed to take care of his mental health. Because having that much attention fixed on you from an untrustworthy source is disturbing. Because, frankly, I don’t think he should.”

Carol scrubs a hand over her mouth and re-evaluates Steve. She thinks of him as she knows he is: young, full of loss, and desperate for something to hold onto. She pictures any one of her cadets in his place (instead of a paragon of all-American goodness) and sighs.

“This is the problem with your leadership and with your team.”

She tells him, not unkindly but without pulling any punches,

“You treat forcing someone to concede to your desires like it’s a compromise. You behave like you shouldn’t have to give anything up. Do you think your positive attention is worth these kinds of concessions to Mr Stark?”

Steve squeezes his eyes shut. Carol feels bad for him. He was a man with a lot of responsibility on his shoulders and absolute morals (the world only existed in black and white, conviction and adversity). There were many situations where that was a good thing. Many where it was the kind of thing the world needed (WWII, where the human rights of monsters entangled with the rights of their victims), many where it let Steve drive forwards where others would hesitate (stopping human
experimentation and taking its victims home, no matter what had been done to them). Right now, though? He needed to re-evaluate the playing field. He needed to re-evaluate what he wanted and what it would take to get it.

"I'd like to be alone." Steve says and Carol frowns unhappily.

“I’d like you to see a therapist.”

She says, blunt as anything, and Steve’s eyes actually water (God, she felt like she had punched a baby or knocked down the Statue of Liberty).

“Yeah,”

He says,

“Good luck with that.”

And shuts the door in her face (she felt the strangest urge to ACTUALLY knock down the Statue of Liberty, just to show smugass Steve 'Bullshit and Misery' Rogers-).

Chapter End Notes

I really need to chill out with the daily updates, but so much of this story is already written! I don't wanna give false expectation, though. This story doesn't have a real schedule and will likely get all over the place at some point. Anyway, this was my favourite chapter of the bunch! I hope it explains some things.

Carol: *looks at the terrible mess around her*
Carol: *squints at Steve*
Carol: Who did this? Was it you?
Steve:: *covered in blood and debris*
Steve: I would never! Why would you accuse me of that!
Steve: Besides, if I did it would be ok. I didn't do anything that bad. I think. I hope.
Carol: *points at Tony*
Carol: You ruined a perfectly good Avenger, that's what you did!
Rhodey: Yeah, you gave him anxiety!
Satisfaction (Fear)

Chapter Summary

Tony is a snack that is very very afraid of being eaten, Bucky selects a rival, and many robots are destroyed in the making of this chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world seems a little brighter when Tony returns from his weekend field trip (*a bunch of happy children and a chatty AI in tow*). However, the tense atmosphere in the compound (*somehow 10x heavier than it was when he left*) threatens this new shine, so Tony drops off his kids and jets off again to tour Stark Industries facilities.

He’s been neglecting his employees – the fire at the server farm was more than enough to prove that (*they looked like they were going to cry when he showed up*). When he calls Helen to check their twitter (*he wants to know how they are doing and if he needs to visit more often. He hopes he didn’t intimidate them by showing up out of the blue when things were going wrong*), she sounds shocked to hear from him. He feels incredibly shitty about it. He updates her on his life (*getting kicked out of RiRi’s suit especially – he’s curious about the biological aspects of it. Why did he bounce back into his own body? Would a similar hit knock him out of his body if he wasn’t already in something else? Helen wants to run some tests and Tony agrees to just...keep escaping*).

Time flies by and soon Tony is back in the compound for a week. He trains the kids, has a short session where his therapist does nothing but side-eye him, and tries not to scream. There’s a crawling sensation over every bit of his exposed skin when Barnes watches Tony train (*there’s this sense that he was waiting for something and Tony didn’t know what it was. Barnes’ gaze was steady, sure, and that fucker knew something Tony didn’t*). When Rogers starts watching him too, it all becomes too much.

Guilt (*an old enemy, an old friend*) nips at Tony’s heels as he jets off to Harley’s doorstep. He teleconferences Helen and runs tests on Extremis on Harley’s ratty couch, poorly-assembled tuna sandwich in hand, as Harley rattles off a dozen and one ideas about the mechanical applications of whale nerves (“*They fold Tony! They fold up and stretch and still conduct! Imagine what wiring like that could do for a large vehicle*”). He stays for dinner and Harley’s mother feeds him with a pinched look (*he’s healthier than ever, but everyone who knew him knew that meant he’d been unhealthy before. The efforts to keep him fed and watered were sweet, so he didn’t complain*).

Helen calls him into her lab for a proper chat during dessert and, with his mother’s permission, Tony takes Harley along (*he tells Helen all about whale nerves. There’s an unholy interest in her gaze and Tony wonders if Harley will become their bastard science child instead of Peter*). The kid proceeds to bully every single post-doc doing their best to stay alive with his childish energy (*it was weird that Harley was in his teens now*). Once they’re finished, Tony flies Harley home through a long and loaded silence.

“You should go back on your anxiety meds, Tony.”
The kid tells him once he finally decides to talk again. Tony can’t even meet his eyes when he tells him,

“Extremis levels out the whole system, buddy. All my drugs are internally produced now.”

There’s a stubborn set to Harley’s mouth that makes Tony grit his teeth, but he owes Harley more than he can ever express (and he knows how few people have ever listened to him. He knows how often Harley talks and talks and nobody hears).

“It’s not about focusing on not being anxious,”

Harley says (he’d clearly been paying attention when Helen had been talking, the little sneak), tapping the bottle of pills in his own pocket,

“It’s about NOT focusing on not being anxious, you control freak.”

Somewhere back in New York, Tony can practically feel his therapist smirking up a storm – he just got schooled by a kid with anxiety (of course, said kid had been putting forth years of effort in behavioural therapy and was the reason Tony had gotten treatment in the first place. Then again, said kid was a KID and Tony was still offended).

Finally, Tony slinks back to the compound to lick his (metaphorical) wounds. Spending time with Harley was like rolling around in a bed of razors, if razors were good for you, and if razors had parents who fed you – the metaphor was getting away from him. While lost in thought, Tony finds Rhodey sleeping alone in his bed. A quick check with Extremis confirms that Vision is wandering through his zen garden. Somehow, the scene it paints is indescribably sad (he did this to them).

“Don’t come to bed tonight.”

Rhodey rasps at him, apparently not asleep (he sounded like he’d been crying. Tony would know. He was pretty sure he’d been the only reason Rhody cried since MIT other than when his first serious girlfriend left him or when his sister had been briefly hospitalized). Tony swallows his hurt (it just sits in his stomach like lead or palladium) and slinks off to the garden to tell Vision he’s home. He doesn’t receive an invitation to stay.

With nowhere else to go, he retreats to Jess’ room. She doesn’t say a word, but she smells like alcohol and looks like she’s been crying when she lets him in. Luke isn’t in her room, which tells him exactly what kind of night this is (a drunk, angry, nobody touch me night). He stammers out an offer to leave, but she pulls him into the bed (he goes willingly, wrapped up in her arms. The scent of shitty bourbon is in his nose and Jess doesn’t manage to cuddle him like Rhody does, but Tony makes do. He has to).

The kids are happy Tony is back. Bucky can see that from the second they enter the facility. Their voices are bright and excited (a memory comes to him, tinted golden brown and rich with life. The lights on Coney Island are bright, but the laughter coming from behind him, laughter that was always tempered by a wheeze and a crackle, is so much brighter). Bucky is happy, too, though Colonel Rhodes looks more depressed than he had in the last month (which is really saying
something – Rhodes looked like he would rather do anything but train with the Avengers, including toss himself into the sea). Bucky is beginning to figure out that Rhodes and Tony are more than a bit like himself and Steve.

He’s lounging by the door, trying to be a little less weird about the staring (he’d stopped with the gifts, he’d stopped trying to talk to Tony, but he found not looking so much harder. It reminded him of when he had to hold his breath longer than a normal human could. He knew he could do it, but his brain panicked anyway), when Jessica Jones enters a hairsbreadth from him. Her sleeve just barely breaches his personal bubble, however it’s enough. She could’ve been several feet from him and it would’ve been enough.

She reeks of Tony.

Bucky’s stomach twists violently and anger boils from his toes to the tips of his ears. Jessica tosses a look over her shoulder and smirks at him (like she knew what was on his mind. Bucky wanted nothing more than to remind Jessica Jones for the last time that she had no idea). Something slips inside of Bucky. He grabs for it, fumbles, and then is abruptly hit with the idea that killing Jessica Jones is completely acceptable. A flicker of fear crosses her face before she turns away from him (her strides faster than usual, her gait the slightest bit unsteady).

Something runs between Bucky’s fingers like sand as he turns his attention towards Colonel Danvers.

The simulation of the day is fighting a legion. It would require careful consideration of space. Acknowledgement of his co-combatants abilities. There would be no room for Bucky to act as a sniper. It’s all he’s been doing lately, but today…

He doesn’t want to hide away in the shadows.

No.

He wants something more.

Bucky thinks about satisfaction. He thinks about satisfying someone (his mouth dripping, his fingers soaked, but is it with blood or-). He thinks about doing more than that. He thinks about being the best, the absolute best, at his craft and not being emptied for it. He thinks about being filled instead (sated for the first time in a century).

One-armed and equipped with only four knives (curved, wicked, and painted to absorb the light. Bucky, if he were in the headspace for it, might’ve appreciated the symbolism), Bucky ravages the battlefield. The Winter Soldier was a cut above anyone else in sheer experience. He was a cut above in his desire to finish the mission.

Nobody else wanted like the Winter Soldier wanted. He knew that for certain.

Bucky works himself in and out of everyone’s space, working with and around them without a word, just like he’d been taught. Do not disobey. Follow the flow of battle. Achieve above anyone else (the others in the Winter Soldier program laying broken on the floor, the others in the program trying their best to knock him down a peg and failing-).

He fucking wrecks the simulation so fast that everyone else is left standing there, breathing too fast
for the insufficient workout they’d received (weak, emotional, without focus). They were afraid. That was good. That was **satisfying**.

Colonel Danvers was saying something, but Bucky completely missed every word of it because Tony Stark was walking onto the field. Every footfall hit Bucky like a gunshot (the stride was long, purposeful, and hiding something. *The Merchant of Death was here in Tony Stark’s place*). Tony surveyed the damage mildly with too-blue eyes (heartbeat too perfect, breathing too steady).

“**You have a problem with my simulation, Bucket O’ Bolts?**”

He says, standing there in a flexible black and gold undersuit that hid absolutely none of his movements or the minute quiver of his left hand (*a sign of humanity underneath the mask. Bucky committed the tell to memory*). Tony was paying attention to what he could do. **Good.**

”I wanted to deliver satisfying results to make up for my recent…poor performance.”

Bucky drawls. He loosens his heavy muscle and allows his body to follow the course it wants to, leaning towards Tony. His tongue wets his lips as he asks,

**“Did I satisfy you?”**

Tony’s skin flushes pink before a ripple of blue chases it away. Bucky’s gaze follows it all the way back under the collar of his suit. He can hear Tony’s heartbeat jump before returning to its unnaturally perfect rhythm.

”**You’re bleeding.**”

Tony says abruptly with a frown, his eyes tracking over to the cap of Bucky’s shoulder (*he had used the titanium to bludgeon a few robots. His whole body was a weapon if he was inventive enough*).

“**Let me...**”

Tony begins, softer and more intimately than Bucky had ever heard him speak. Then Tony freezes, only one step closer to Bucky with a single hand outstretched. Bucky watches that hand tremble and he aches for the touch. He wants it. Deliberately, he angles his head just a little closer to it, baring his throat in an exposed line, though it’s nowhere near enough to cross the distance between them.

Tony’s hand trembles harder.

”**The point of the exercise was teamwork, Barnes.”**

He says, clenching his hand into a perfectly still fist.

“**Decimating everything around you like that wasn’t teamwork. I’ll make the enemies harder to destroy next time.”**

Tony strides off, but Bucky gets the slightest feeling of satisfaction anyway (like he’d managed to snap up a snack after a day without food). It takes a long moment for him to focus on anything other than Tony’s retreating back. When he does, he sees Colonel Rhodes staring between him and Tony in blatant horror. His reaction isn’t one Bucky is interested in though, so he ignores him in favour of inclining his head towards Jessica. He smiles like he’s always been meant to, always been able to once he’d lost his grip on that certain something: like a fucking nightmare.
He completely misses Steve and Colonel Danvers trading a look, not that he’d care if he did.

“So, Ms Danvers tells me you had an incident…”

Is the first thing Bucky hears when he sits down for his mandatory twice weekly session. The irritation he feels at the statement is old hat by now. He’s sick of his therapist. He’s sick of all of… this. What they were calling an ‘incident’, he called victory.

Were they all scared that the Winter Soldier had come out to play? That he had displayed some kind of reckless disregard for his own safety? Because he knew better than to hurt himself when he was trying to earn something (he was the greatest weapon in an arsenal that never ever backfired). He hadn’t hurt anyone else either, so he doesn’t see the problem (the leash he keeps on himself has been welting his hand. It kept sliding out, sliding away, leaving rope burns behind).

Bucky smirks at his therapist (a delicate woman with a fine wobble to her chin. She was afraid of him, no matter how hard she tried not to be). It’s a terrible idea, but he does it anyway.

“There was no incident.”

He says flat as can be (just to watch her squirm. This is more comfortable than her trying to relate to him. This feels normal). He doesn’t say anything else as she watches him.

Bucky doesn’t know why everyone is so determined to see him declawed when they still want him to fight. They wanted his ruthless efficiency, but not if it scared them. They wanted those skills but not the silence, the mindset, that was native to them. Everybody only wanted half of Bucky Barnes (but too-blue eyes had fixed on him, had challenged him, had drawn and quartered him for his sins. Somebody didn’t WANT any of Bucky Barnes, but had him anyway).

”What are your thoughts on the simulation you ran on Tuesday?”

His therapist asks, carefully like he’s a china doll that’s going to crack if she looks at it wrong. Bucky isn’t delicate, though. Weapons aren’t delicate.

“I completed the simulation in record time. The only damage I received was cosmetic, there were no team injuries, and for once nobody got in anybody else’s way.”

He says, keeping his expression blank.

“Would you call it a success?”

She says, and…

Ah, Bucky can see what she’s so shaken about now.

The way she said success, the emphasis on the s, she actually wanted to say “satisfactory”. That’s what they were all so twitchy about. Bucky was only any good when their hands were on the trigger – they didn’t like it when he folded his own fingers over it, passing it to whoever he wanted to.
A slow lazy grin spreads over Bucky’s face. He knows it well - had practiced it in the mirror watching old war reels (Bucky Barnes the rake, every man’s everyman). It’s his, but it’s not. Less and more.

“Mr Stark pointed out that I missed the point of the exercise.”

He says, teasing her with it, irritated that this woman and everyone else thought that his interest in Tony Stark was any of their business or that they could come even close to understanding what he was thinking (what he’d been through),

“Though I feel pretty good about my performance. I think I’ll be able to achieve the desired results soon.”

She looks like she’s seen a ghost (and wasn’t that what he usually was here? A ghost? Bucky had never been anything but morose or silent or confused in their sessions. He’s never let all his sharp edges show, the jagged teeth of the Winter Soldier in Bucky Barnes soft supplicant mouth).

“Are you satisfied?”

He asks, playing for the confusion now, leaning over her desk and into her space with that crooked grin (the timbre of his voice low, rich, and meant only for dark rooms and darker desires). She colours, just like Tony had but so much less fulfilling, and leans away from him.

“Yes,”

She says (too quickly, heart pounding),

“That’s all for today Mr Barnes. I’d like you to think about-“

But he’s already out the door.

“He was hitting on him.”

Steve says to Carol, staring at his hands and wondering when the Hell his life had run so far off the rails. His eidetic memory wouldn’t let go of the moment Tony had blushed. Tony never blushed.

Carol looks a little hysterical (she was usually so unflappable, this was going to ruin her professional image) as she yells,

“Anybody with eyes could see that! He was extremely obvious about it!”

Carol thinks about Barnes’ face. He’d just zeroed in on Tony, an eager light shining in his eyes with his enemies crumbled at his feet (like some kind of avenging angel…or a demon. Most likely a demon). He hadn’t reacted to her at all. He looked like a dog ready for praise, only so much worse (so much worse). When Tony had actually SPOKEN to him, the damn fool, Barnes entire body had strained like he was resisting moving at all. Then, Christ, the way he asked if Tony was satisfied.
His voice had gone so dark and hungry than Carol had a single bizarre second of wondering if they were fucking. Barnes had watched the blush creep off of Tony’s skin without any disappointment (which was so much worse than if he had’ve been disappointed. Carol wanted him to be disappointed, God, please) instead watching it go with fervent interest and like he was planning to peel Tony right out of his undersuit.

And the cherry on top: leaning in when Tony had reached forward, swaying like a drunk who just couldn’t resist, but then very very blatantly delivering the world’s most terrifying and sober smile to Jessica. Jessica who, according to Steve when Carol asked (because Carol was getting wise to this garbage), smelled like Tony.

Carol regretted taking this job. She regretted it so much (though Rhodes was here and just as horrified as she was, so hey, she was getting something out of it).

“I don’t know what the Hell he’s doing”

Steve whispered, still staring at his hands (Carol almost want to slap him around until he looked at her, the coward. This was his messed up friend! He had no right to be horrified in her presence),

“Tony doesn’t want to be in the same room as us. He doesn’t want to be on the same continent as us.”

Carol is equally bewildered (damn Steve Rogers for making her empathize with him!!!). She had known Barnes had an unhealthy interest, but the way he’d reacted to actually getting Tony’s attention was...extreme.

Carol REALLY regretted taking this job.

Jessica Jones and Matt Murdock steal away from the wall they’d been leaning against, listening in. They were going to go have WORDS with Bucky Barnes.

Chapter End Notes

I have ANOTHER midterm so helloooooo delays. University sucks, y’all.

Bucky: *destroys a bunch of robots*
Bucky: *intensely stares at Tony*
Bucky (internally): I love you
Bucky (externally): I am a very competent killer
Bucky (internally): Nailed it
Tony (internally): I have no mouth but I must scream. Wait, I have a mouth. I am screaming. I am screaming a lot
Lesson Two

Chapter Summary

Jessica takes Bucky to school, teaches him about Black Holes, and then leaves before a PTA meeting can be called on her ass.

(This one is extra short because it's the end of an arc, oh my!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Within two seconds of gaining a tail, Bucky knew that it was Daredevil. He easily tracked Bucky through the dark and shadowy corners he favoured. He wasn’t even phased by Bucky completely disappearing from sight (confirming that he really was blind. His ability to navigate was uncanny, though Bucky’s file on him contained his suspicions that Daredevil was enhanced. Perhaps he’d have to update it).

Now that Bucky had loosened his leash, it was taking all of his self-control not to drop into a murderous prowl and snap at the stalking (Daredevil wasn’t even trying to be subtle anymore). Docility had never really been native to him, and passivity only lasted as long as an observation phase demanded. He longed to shrug it off like an ill-fitting coat (newspapers in Steve’s shoes, Bucky’s suit being too loose and then stretched to its limits). However, he knew he was being stalked, and he knew his ghost knew, which meant he was being lead somewhere. He had to be passive if this was going to happen.

He wants what’s coming next.

The herding ends on the roof of the aquatic training facility (unused and unwanted by Colonel Danvers). Jessica Jones (it was never going to be anyone else) is waiting there for him. Daredevil is lurking in the stairwell and blocking the access door. All the cameras there and out in the open were disabled somehow (sparking erratically or simply covered). Friday probably wouldn’t let that stand and, if Bucky’s theories were right, Tony would know about it sooner rather than later (probably already knew about it now).

Good.

"Square the fuck up, asshole. Tony sleeps in my bed and you’ve got no right to be jealous of that."

Jessica announces, all bluster and posturing and aggression. She strides across the rooftop until she's just a foot in front of him.

“You’ve got no right to even breathe his air.”

She hisses. It speaks volumes of her relationship with Tony (Jessica could breathe it, then? She could lay by his side, share his bed, touch him-). It makes him burn. It makes his first few hits more vicious than intended, and so their stand-off quickly turns into a back-alley brawl. It’s nothing like the soldier’s work (efficient and cold), but it isn’t the same as fights in New York used to be either
(the grit and the grime of the street digging itself under Bucky’s nails, the risk of the police coming a bigger threat than his opponent). No. This is a whole new shade (so much more) of brutality.

Bucky feels adrenaline crackling electrically through his veins as Jessica whips him into the concrete. She moved faster than he had anticipated from training, more randomly, but Bucky Barnes doesn’t make the same mistake twice. He’s constantly moving - whenever she has the chance she grabs him by the hair, scratches, fights dirty. She’s not trying to kill him, but she is trying to make a point (Jessica Jones: always trying to make a point).

“He sleeps in Colonel Rhodes bed more often than yours.”

He growls (he would know. It was painfully obvious that those two wore each other’s clothes, arrived and left at the same time, spent all of their free time wrapped around each other like-),

“I’m not jealous of that. I just hate you.”

He does hate Jessica, though she laughs at the statement (the sound is more angry than amused, but Bucky doesn’t think Jessica knows how to sound any other way). She bites him through his casual shirt (worthless) and wipes red-stained lips across her hand. He kicks her in the face.

“The feeling is mutual. I know creeps with no boundaries when I see them.”

She jeers at him, mouth even redder with her own blood. Sweet Jesus, she makes Bucky so angry. She thinks she KNOWS him, had thought that since their very first interaction. Chastising him when no one else would, talking shit like she was even remotely capable of human interaction, when she was even more of an insufferable storm cloud than he was (refusing to put a mask on it like he did. Refusing to be leashed and collared)…

“You think you’re better than me?”

He finds himself demanding hotly (he doesn’t remember even thinking the words, but now that they are out there, he finds that he means them),

“Well, you’re fucking right!”

He grabs her around the waist, fury rolling through him and dulling the painful stretch in his armless shoulder,

“But if I let that stop me, I’d be better off dead!”

And he crushes her into the rooftop (the concrete crumbling against her back). She lets out an animal howl of rage when his foot slams down on her thigh.

“So fucking full of yourself!”

She snarls, disturbingly powerful hands lifting his leg even as he put more weight onto it,

“Everything is about poor little Bucky Barnes and his self-hatred! I see through you, you piece of shit!”

And wasn’t that just the kicker? Wasn’t that what she always thought? What she’d been waving in his face like a red flag before a bull?
“Yeah!? What do you see then, huh!?"

He screams back, sweeping his leg out of her grip and elbowing her wrist (hard enough to snap if it hadn’t been made out of what, fucking stone? No, he could break stone, but he couldn’t break her. Somebody else had already tried),

The look in her eyes is one he remembers from WWII. It was the cagey angry stare of somebody who had been violated in the most fundamental ways (Azzano was Hell on Earth, its people watching him like somebody was walking over their grave – the memory jarred him, freezing him for just long enough that Jessica could grab his ankle and throw him to the ground).

“I see a black hole that’s noticed the brightest thing in the room! You want his attention and you don’t give a shit if he doesn’t want to give it to you, you’re just gonna suck it all up anyway!”

She screams right back at him. She staggers to her feet, wheezing hard and trying to catch her breath (her eyes still slightly unfocused from the first time he’d managed to hit her head),

“You don’t care about what he wants. You care about what YOU want, no matter how you try to twist it.”

Slips out of her like a curse. The feeling it provokes in him is absolutely insidious.

“You don’t know anything about me.”

He hisses at her, but a twinge of doubt was embedded in his self-satisfaction and anger like shrapnel. He had just wanted (recognition from someone he couldn’t stop looking at, a chance for redemption, a chance for punishment, a challenge, something more, something more)... He had wanted.

Colonel Danvers had tried to stop him. Steve had tried to divert his attention. Jessica had beaten one lesson into his head already, back when he had been desperate for scraps and ready to listen. Tony didn’t go anywhere near him. And Bucky had pushed back against them all (Tony had built him things. Tony brought him back to the US. Tony had built him a room. Tony had talked to him). He hadn’t understood, but then he had, and he hadn’t stopped pushing (he had tried, but then another angry broken thing entered the scene, reeking of what he wanted and couldn’t have, and he had just-). Bucky had just changed tactics, because once the soldier had a mission (once Bucky Barnes had something he wanted) they didn’t relent.

“You’re forcing yourself on him. Your whole team is, too. I don’t need to know you to know that.”

Jessica spits blood and then spits more. She gnashes her teeth, turning her back on Bucky and walking towards the edge of the roof.

“If Tony gives you what you want while you’re pushing him, it won’t be because he wants to.”

She tosses back almost casually. Her eyes lock with his, blazing with cold fury (the eyes of somebody who knew violation and knew it well. “Somebody is walking over my grave, darling, somebody is stepping on the soil and I’m already dead.” Who had said that? Who was it? Who had he known who was already dead).
“A Pyrrhic victory. You won’t win a damn thing, Barnes.”

She announces, tossing herself off the roof like she could fly.

Bucky Barnes had ripped a man’s heart out after he watched his parents die (Extremis had curled over Tony’s skin to pull his blush away, had steadied his heart and his breathing, had concealed the signs of panic, and had repaired all the parts that Bucky broke. It had taken away Tony’s grey hairs and Natasha had said…she said he liked being old). He hadn’t forgotten that. But maybe he had made it mean something different than it should have (redemption…punishment…maybe all it really meant was another victim).

Maybe he should just go back to skulking the compound, only being taken out to fight (pulled from the freezer to be emptied and filled with blood). He wasn’t meant for talking to people (even his voice was turning out to be a weapon. His very presence was toxic).

The slightest ting reaches Bucky’s ears as metal taps down against concrete behind him. It brings his adrenaline high back with a jolt, but this time he also feels nauseous.

“That’s a lot of blood.”

A robotic voice says. Bucky turns around on time to see Iron Man leaning down and investigating the puddle Jessica had spat out.

“You and Jess do know you can take your spats to the gym like normal traumatized super humans? You won’t even have to disable the cameras over half the compound to ‘distract’ my AI. My very upset and betrayed AI.”

Tony says (faceplate up, glowing blue slits still pointed at the blood). Bucky doesn’t try to look him in the eyes.

“Wasn’t my idea.”

He mumbles and Tony scoffs,

“I don’t doubt that, but I doubt you would be here if you didn’t want to be. Go back to where you belong, Buckyball.”

There’s a moment where Bucky hesitates (Tony had called him-). He considers taking advantage of the moment (infinitely rare and precious) to say what he wants to say. But then his brain sticks on the word want. It rattles around (a gear had slipped in the arm once, had fallen against the sliding panels, had rattled all of his nerves until he went half-mad) in the background as Tony shifts uncomfortably. Bucky takes note of the raised faceplate, the physical distance between them, the blood Tony is still kneeling over and…

He just goes. He leaves.

He doesn’t like it, but he won’t give Jessica the satisfaction of failing one of her tests (and he won’t have Tony Stark crush his own panic for Bucky again).
For a long time, Tony stays on the empty rooftop. He watches the sunset as he incinerates the blood pooling at his feet (*a biohazard and a risk rolled into one*). Once no trace of it remains, Tony finally allows himself to speak his thoughts aloud;

“That was weird.”

Barnes has never backed off before. He had never even come close to it. The fact that he was now, filled Tony with a sense of unease. He had long since learned not to trust anything resembling relief, quickly turning it into something more recognizable.

“Fuck off, body.”

He mumbles, prying open his goddamn pill bottle like a proper non-cyborg adult. He pops a pill, but already knows it’s too late.

Tony’s anxiety eats at him and, sighing, he pulled out his phone.

It was time to book another appointment with his therapist.

Chapter End Notes

-Tony: Ring ring it's me again, human terror incarnate!  
-His Therapist: What did he do this time?  
-Tony: He single-handedly activated my anx...wait  
-His Therapist: Don't-  
-Tony: Haha, single-handedly. See what I did there? He only has one-  
-His Therapist: *hangs up*  

-Bucky: *calls his therapist*  
-His Therapist: *bursts into overjoyed tears*  
-His Therapist: "I would like to thank my parents for bringing me into this world, my professors at university for getting me onto this path."  
-Bucky: *hangs up*  

(((Pssst...the arc is called "Bucky jamming his head up his ass, admiring the view, and then deciding he would very much like to unjam his head now thank you)))
Coffee and Philosophy

Chapter Summary

Coffee grounds are a fun form of fortune-telling, Turkish coffee is delicious, and trench coffee is a mistake of epic proportions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“You didn’t look over the tapes of their confrontation?”

Tony’s therapist asks, curiousity colouring her expression (nearly-neutral and inoffensive).

“Jess keeps reaming me out about privacy. It’s important to her. This is important to me, but...”

Tony pauses and his therapist inclines her head, finishing the statement for him,

“She respects your boundaries so you want to respect hers. That’s good, Tony. I’m happy you can let go of control when it’s beneficial for you and your relationships.”

Tony isn’t sure if he’s really managed to do that, but she was always telling him that baby steps were steps and all that jazz (she hadn’t taken kindly to the run before you walk talk). A mischievous grin begins to form on her (falsely) innocent old lady mug,

“Though I must admit, having information about EVERYTHING does make my job easier sometimes.”

She says slyly. Tony snorts – she loved his perfect recall and his constant analysis of everything even if she thought it wasn’t good for him. Shaking his head, he goes back to preparing a carafe of Turkish coffee. His therapist was very particular in her tastes and preparing a cup she would like was a good challenge (in fact, he was pretty sure the challenge was intentional. Acknowledging that would probably ruin the careful balance he was maintaining, though. He was still semi-pretending he wasn’t in therapy).

”When the pressure is on to succeed, you want all the cards in your hand. And if they aren’t in your hand...”

He says, sweeping out one hand and beckoning her to share her thoughts.

“You’ll just set up mirrors and cameras so you can read the ones in everyone else’s hands.”

Fond amusement forms a warm undercurrent in her tone. Tony laughs,

“Or just count the cards. I do love cheating gamblers.”

“Very Faustian of you.”
She responds, shaking her head,

“Though I’ll hope, for your sake, it’s at least Goethe’s version.”

Tony grins, crushing cardamom seed with the flat of a knife,

“I prefer to think of myself as a Vegas showman in this context, actually. There’s still a deal with the devil, but at least that way the devil is me.”

He presses the cardamom into golden sugar, crushing it into a cube that he drops into pile of fine coffee grounds in his carafe. He fills it with water and sets about carefully boiling it in comfortable silence (pouring out the first third before it boils over, carefully frothing it again to form the köpük, letting the grounds settle perfectly before handing it over).

Tony’s therapist accepts her drink and eyes him over the near-black rim (dark as night, sweet as love — that was what made a good brew tatlı).

“A man of many talents, but is coffee one of them?”

She teases, same as she had the past seven times (Tony is beginning to hope she never likes his coffee, but knowing her she’ll find something else for him to make. She was willing to indulge his urge to spoil people with quality). She takes a sip and closes her eyes. When he doesn’t say or do anything, she huffs. His therapist gestures for Tony to talk as she decides whether or not she likes this beverage (his progress).

“I find myself not wanting to invade Barnes’ privacy either. Jess is practically my sponsor, so she makes sense, but everything about Barnes just doesn’t...”

Tony pauses, frustrated. Barnes hit the panic button in his mind in a different way than everyone else. It made thinking about him a skittish thing.

“He’s a threat, and in some ways I’m not even sure if he knows he’s human, but...”

Tony flicks his tongue out to wet his lips, cursing the sudden dryness (why was phrasing this so hard?).

“A beast can never be as cruel as a human being, so artistically, so picturesquely cruel.”

He finally quotes.

”The Brothers Karamazov? Interesting choice.”

His therapist says (which was an understatement he loved her for making — it was Russian and revolved around patricide, free will, and judgement because Tony just couldn’t resist dramatic irony),

“So Mr Barnes is the least threatening person in the room right now. He can’t hurt you like the Avengers can hurt you, though he can still kill you. Am I hearing you correctly?”

Tony knows he must look like he’s sucked a lemon (or a particularly nasty co- don’t think rude thoughts in the presence of a nice lady, Tony. Don’t. He suspected sometimes that she could hear everything on his mind). He pours some coffee for himself and shaves in some orange rind (blood
oranges because the coffee was already sweet – that and Vision had started cultivating them.

“I guess? But everybody else sees him as the biggest threat out there.”

He grinds out, grating at the orange in a particularly vicious fashion,

“I don’t know how to feel about it. They’ve all done SOMETHING to him, whether I know it or not, and it’s been in an effort to get him to leave me alone.”

Tony swirls the coffee and then reaches over to hers, adding in some of his massive fruit pile and a pinch of cinnamon (he wonders if he should’ve used a different kind. There were different kinds of cinnamon, right? He didn’t know anything about spices outside of their relative quality). She swats at his fingers and wrinkles her nose, but takes another sip anyway (she always did).

“I want him to leave me alone. But, when he finally walked away, I didn’t trust it. I don’t trust it. It feels like a bad thing.”

Tony admits, long fingers drumming against his chest (sometimes, when he hit it just right, Extremis would spatter his skin with blue like water drops. It only ever happened in the centre of his chest though, like the arc reactor had become a liquid pool of light. It was more comforting than he would ever admit, though Pepper had seen the spatter once and smiled like an angel).

"It’s a change from a routine that you’ve grown accustomed to, Tony. Even though it’s a routine that makes you uncomfortable, it’s one you understand. It makes sense that any deviation would make your anxiety worse, especially when you know that it’s influenced by people you care for.”

She tells him, gesturing for him to pass over the coffee beans (he’d used an Ethiopian blend this time, fair trade and everything. Some of their previous philosophical discussions had led him to realizing she was very passionate about the ethics of many plantations…or lack thereof),

“It doesn’t mean that you want Barnes to talk to you. It doesn’t mean you’ve been…”

She forms air quotes with her hands,

“Leading him on.”

Tony slumps in relief at her bracing words. Still, he can’t help but say,

“But what if him backing off means that he’s just got good intentions? That I’m ostracizing—“

She flicks a coffee bean at his head (it hits him surprisingly hard. Her aim was impeccable).

“What we wish, we readily believe, and what we ourselves think, we imagine others think also.”

She quotes, before folding her hands under her chin and eying him squarely,

”Barnes made you uncomfortable. The reason doesn’t matter as much as the emotion here. You want him to be a good person, you want to wrong about all of your fears, and you feel bad about influencing others with those fears. However, he’s given you no evidence that he’ll respect your boundaries until recently, you have no obligation to like him, and your friends are adults capable of making their own decisions.”
She tells him, then drains her coffee to the last drop.

“Maybe Mr Barnes is learning a thing or two about himself right now.”

She sets down her coffee mug, a little smile on her lips,

“That is his progress to make, Tony, not yours.”

While Tony stares at her, she swipes his mug. This had been the most straight-forward session they had ever had and he doesn’t know what to make of it (since when had she distracted him out of deflecting? What tactic had she used? Surely he hadn’t done it on his own).

“The coffee is good.”

She says (and wow, it feels like she means something entirely different).

“I expect dessert next time. Be prepared.”

———

Somewhere far across the compound, Bucky sits in his own therapy appointment in silence. It’s par-de-course for him these days. Sitting in a brightly lit office on an overstuffed couch (too domestic and open for his nerves) trying to express his discontent without expressing anything else. Willing the hour he has here to pass quickly.

He was tired. Somehow, doing nothing in this room was exhausting (he wished coffee still worked on him. He’d do anything for shitty trench coffee, thick as mud and just as gritty).

His therapist waits him out for a good twenty minutes. She sits there and lets him stew in his encounter with Tony earlier (in the memories of Jessica Jones’ sharp words and Iron Man red next to the darkening stain of blood). Eventually, her patience wears thin and she speaks;

“If you don’t like me, you can always get another therapist.”

Bucky has…never considered that before (did he even dislike her, or was it just having a therapist?). If he wasn’t already busy stewing in other things 90% of the time, maybe he would’ve (nah, he never would’ve assumed he had a choice about this, not when he was forced into it in the first place. Nobody had asked for his opinion).

”I know that therapy can be court mandated, and sometimes it’s important that it is, but therapy is pointless if you don’t want it.”

She says. Gruffly, Bucky answers,

“I don’t want anybody in my head. Never again.”

She considers him for awhile (head cocked to the side delicately like a bird. This woman was almost painfully expressive).

“I’m not supposed to be in your head. Therapy is all about choice - you making the choice to change in ways that encourage your own growth and autonomy.”
She tells him as if it made the slightest bit of difference to Bucky (she had no idea what it was like to be in his position, that much was obvious). He looks at her balefully before growling,

“‘You talk as if choice can’t be coerced.’

The mood in the little office plummets even further than usual (and it was usually pretty bad). His therapist’s sniffles sounds a little wet when she bows her head.

“I’d like to hunt around my colleagues for somebody more prepared to deal with POWs. I was recommended here because, well I suppose it’s not relevant if you don’t want to know. I don’t think I was the right choice.”

She mumbles to her desk, unable to look Bucky in the face. He’s perfectly safe to look at right now. He was pretty sure this was the first time he hadn’t scowled at her, actually. If anything, Bucky was pleasantly surprised at her humility. He had always felt like she wanted something from him with the way that she’d cling to every emotional display and twisted it into a lesson on “social norms” (as if he didn’t already know them all, how best to use them, how to identify them on other spies…sure he wasn’t the best at it outside of a mission, but he KNEW the norms).

“You did your best.”

He admits, staring down at his fingers. They clench uselessly, curling around nothing at all (not even the tiny Gerber knife he snuck into these sessions past the metal detectors they made him pass through).

“I just didn’t want your help.”

Bucky wonders about that (about wanting something whether or not it’s good for you. About how wanting felt like personhood, how wanting took over everything, how without a mission he almost felt like-). A realization stabs him in the gut.

“You work with children, don’t you?”

Bucky asks abruptly (the enthusiasm, the praise, the near-exaggeration of all of her own cues…she smiles sheepishly at him. A hot rush of shame swamps his body). Bucky frowns (fist clenching uselessly before it is forcibly laid still) and says,

“I’m not a child. Even if I’m learning how to do things again, it’s not even close to...”

She finishes for him;

“Equal. I know. That’s why I’m recommending another therapist.”

After that, there’s nothing else to say. There was never anything to say to begin with (this office had always been full of repressive silence). The quiet makes the burning in Bucky’s ears and the roiling in his stomach that much more obvious. Unable to take it, Bucky stands (nodding at her once, trying to convey respect despite…this) and leaves before his allotted hour is over. She doesn’t try to stop him.

Nobody ever does.
Bucky's therapist sits in her designated office for over an hour after he leaves. She knows she's going to have to pack the place up. She'll go back to her place in Rhode Island, the angry little warriors she had raised for years, and everything will be fine.

Everything will be fine for **her**.

She chokes on a single sob, pressing her fingers tightly over her mouth. Letting down a patient never got easier. Letting down a man like Sergeant Barnes, patronizing him even if it wasn't her choice (*the council had chosen her, presented their reasons, and she had agreed. She hadn't known*), was the lowest point of her entire career. Still, she wasn't one of the brightest women in her field for nothing.

She wasn't going to let him down again.

She was going to find somebody who fit the bill or die trying.

**Chapter End Notes**

The Goethe comment is essentially Tony's therapist wishing him a happy(ish) ending instead of having his soul flung into Hell. He leaves his therapy session and has an honest to God giggle fit over it. Rhodey is in the kitchen making hot chocolate when Tony sidles up and offers him a deal. Rhodey doesn't even ask what it is - he just takes it. Tony cackles like a genuine toddler and whispers,

"May Goethe have mercy on your soul."

Rhodey hates Tony's therapist just a little bit. Her references were better than his. He low-key suspects her of being alive for the publication of every single piece of famous literature ever (later that night he hangs up a garlic braid in the kitchen. Now that lady wouldn't be able to raid their fridge after Tony's sessions. If this didn't work, he'd put a silver cap on the orange juice she kept chugging like a heathen).

(The other quote in this is from Julius Caesar)
Safety On

Chapter Summary

Bucky learns proper gun etiquette from an overly dramatic DND character.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next few Avengers exercises are skipped by Bucky. He doesn’t want to be on the field right now. He doesn’t want to see the New Avengers…he’s barely able to tolerate the old ones (Steve, the persistent little punk, kept leaving him meals just outside of his door. He’d probably starve without them, but that didn’t mean he was grateful). Colonel Danvers does absolutely nothing to stop him – she doesn’t even send him any reprimands through Friday (like she had done when Clint tried to skip out). Bucky can’t help but wonder if she’s grateful that he’s gone.

He makes her uncomfortable. He makes everybody uncomfortable.

He uses his newfound free time to roam the compound. He whittles away time on the internet, watching people interact safely and normally, and just…vegetates. It feels alright (though it doesn’t feel good). The anger that had been choking him was fading away, however it came back with a vengeance when poked (Steve and Sam could attest to that. They meant well, but neither of them knew how to leave a man alone with his thoughts).

Eventually, his wandering let him find some evidence of the gifts he’d given (stupid, so incredibly pathetically stupid). His first reaction is muddled- he’s happy they aren’t in the garbage, but unhappy they aren’t with Tony. Then, swiftly, his unhappiness is redirected at himself. He knows Tony didn’t want gifts. Even if he got him things he wanted, the act of giving them was still not wanted. The fact that they hadn’t been burned in a fire should be enough for him.

Bucky runs his fingers carefully across the cold porcelain bouquet. He bends the petals, pushing them to the point of almost breaking, before he bites down hard enough of his lower lip to draw blood (it distracts him from the suspicious wetness on his cheeks. God, he needed to stop).

He heads up to the rooftop where he had last felt alive. His memory was practically perfect after the serum and it lets him live out his fight with Jessica with crystal clarity. He digs his fingers into the concrete and digs even harder at her words in his brain (wishing he could rip them out, wishing he could just take them to heart).

It only takes a few minutes for him to get angry and leave.

The next day he’s back up there. He digs back into the same spot, tries to struggle against the fury choking him, his lack of control, and then leaves.

He’s back the next day.

And the next.
Rinse, repeat (but he’d never be clean).

He doesn’t know how to deal with the urge to go back. He doesn’t know how to deal with the darkness following him (the wanting crawling through his veins and running delicate fingers down his spine). He’s scared.

Bucky almost misses his therapist. He wasn’t sure what had happened with the new one. Was he still getting a new one?

Sitting on the rooftop, hanging his feet out over the ground, Bucky wonders why he’s even here.

_______

When Rhodey was busy and Vision couldn’t catch him at it, Tony stole away to the garden to watch footage of Bucky Barnes on the West compound roof. He goes over every second of Bucky’s struggle, his eventual escape, his return on loop. Tony runs calculations on the rate at which the hole in the roof is growing and wonders if he’ll have to patch it up.

He can’t stop watching, even though his therapist tries to tell him he doesn’t have to. He keeps an eye out because he doesn’t want Barnes to do anything drastic. Also…he wants to.

It makes the tiny (larger than he’d admit, festering and dark) guilty part of him, the one that can’t stop comparing Barnes’ stump with Rhodey’s legs, feel better. That and he never wants to see Barnes put a gun in his mouth, but gets the feeling that it has happened before, might happen again, when nobody is there for him. Tony doesn’t want to see, but at least this way…someone was there.

Crunching pebbles underfoot, Tony taps a repeating rhythm into his chest (“illuminate, illuminate, illuminate”).

_______

Eventually, Bucky’s self-imposed isolation is forced to come to an end. His new therapist is a man even larger and more grizzled than Bucky. He’s missing several fingers and a leg below the knee. He looks like he would probably put up a good fight against the Winter Soldier, if only because he was clearly too stubborn to die (his scars almost entirely belonged to fatal wounds. There were drag marks on his neck, long since healed but prominent to Bucky’s expert eye).

”The world you live in,”

The man starts, not even looking at Bucky (his eyes closed, white lashes resting on his cheeks in a parody of relaxation),

“Is a dirty dark place. It lets you be your basest self, but it also asks you to be an agent of harm.”

Bucky sucks in a breath when the man pauses. He feels the weight of his attention, though the man continues as if he hasn’t noticed a thing,

“It asks you to make distinctions between enemies and friends, it whispers in your ear that there isn’t anything else.”

Bucky lets himself melt into the shadows of this dim space (nothing like the bright open office of the past), but he gets the feeling that his new therapist knows exactly where he’s gone,
“It isn’t lying to you, but it is forgetting a category of people.”

The man pins Bucky in place with a one-eyed stare,

“There are also civilians. Non-combatants. People who don’t know anything about your world. Would you agree?”

Bucky, frozen in place, doesn’t respond.

“Your friends and your enemies only need one half of you as you are now. They need protection or elimination. They need the fighter.”

The mountain of a man, the fighter (too stubborn to die, to vicious to be allowed to live without somebody trying to kill him), taps his chest three times,

“Civilians need the other half. They’ll nurture it. They’ll raise the man inside of you into somebody who holds onto the fighter, onto the gun you’ve become, and decides when the safety comes off.”

Bucky doesn’t know any civilians. He knows tangential civilians (those who can barely fall into that category, those who have seen combat in some way shape or form). He isn’t allowed to-

“There is your goal is to let civilization in because you need to turn the safety on sometimes, Sergeant Barnes. You are unfortunately limited in your social options, but I know you are a talented operative. Your observational skills are top notch. I know you can fake it, Barnes, but I want you to make it with what you have.”

Bucky whispers,

“How?”

From his shadowy corner (throwing his voice, making it sound like he was somewhere else even if he knew it was futile. It felt like he had to test this man). His therapist taps his chest again in the same rhythm,

“Begin with making yourself comfortable. What makes you comfortable, Barnes?”

There is no answer for that question during their first session. Instead, they quietly take apart several guns (Russian-make, sleek and efficient), cleaning them and then slotting them back together. It brings Bucky quiet, but it doesn’t bring him peace. He doesn’t often have quiet though, so he’ll take it (RiRi falling, Bucky aiming his gun...).

"Competition.”

Bucky quietly admits when he outstrips his therapist’s assembly pile by a wide margin. This is familiar to him. It’s familiar to both sides of him.

He thinks a little harder, before sighting down his SIGM400.
“Protection.”

He says, imagining sitting in a tree deep in Axis territory (*Steve saluting him, revealing his position, forcing him to move move move*),

“Strategizing.”

Brewing a strong Italian espresso while sorting a disassembled patchwork grenade launcher into two separate weapons, Bucky says,

“Good scents. Familiar ones...from before. Bread smells different – sweeter - now. So does plastic.”

He fiddles with a stray piece of metal that doesn’t fit anywhere (*yet*) and clenches it between his teeth before saying,

“Russian ballet. A sturdy knife.”

Armed to the teeth and brewing coffee, sketching blueprints with his single hand, Bucky mumbles,

“A wall to my back. A way to keep my mind occupied.”

His thoughts flash to what occupies his mind most these days. He struggles with the guilt and the **longing** before muttering,

“The hole in my floor. The colour blue.”

Holding a session in his room, tucked well out of sight, listening to his therapist bitch about burning the coffee beans whenever he had to make a good brew himself, Bucky asks,

“How do I learn to want to get better?”

It feels like a stupid question. However, this man was patient like any good commander, willing to answer stupid questions if it meant there would be good results. Bucky’s therapist huffs, thunking his foot and his prosthetic onto the table across from Bucky’s hideaway (*the prosthetic had a design of some sort painted on it, though Bucky had never gotten to see it completely revealed)*.

“You find a reason to be off the battlefield. Something you can’t do on it. Or can’t do as well on it.”

He says.

“I don’t know how to see anything other than the battlefield.”

Bucky responds, finding his frustration easier to tamp down while he was buried under his bed in the hole in his floor,
“I don’t know how to look away from it. I might as well die.”

”You’re the best Soldier for a reason, Barnes.”

His therapist sighs,

“And part of that reason is who you are as a man. You want more than this, don’t you? I always did. I always wanted everything I could get once they let me out of my cage. Cut off my own fingers to get more.”

He places a cup of coffee on the ground with his three-fingered hand crooked stiffly around it. One of Stark’s robots rolls over to it (a tiny little cleaner, a symbol of the future, and a piece of Tony Stark Bucky was allowed to have), carrying the mug to Bucky.

”I want too much.”

Bucky says, stroking his hand over the bot’s back. It shivers in contentment, the AI in it acting like a common housecat,

“And I want it in a way that isn’t right.”

(Isn’t safe)

”That’s because you want it on the battlefield, Barnes. You want it when it’s a fight to win. You want it in the seconds before somebody takes it away from you. You want it in the moments you can’t have it, or in the moments where you can only destroy it.”

His therapist explains patiently while Bucky’s breath hitches in a little sob (Natalia, dancing beautifully, with a knife strapped to her thigh. Beautiful only for a moment. His Red Room children, still filled with possibilities, moments away from destruction. His apartment in Romania, peaceful for only a few weeks before his door had been kicked in. Steve, angry at the world, irrevocably changed by it the second Bucky turned his back. Tony glowing arc reactor blue, Tony with brown eyes, Tony with his heart in his hands—).

“That’s your reason to get off the battlefield, Barnes. To want things in a way that’s safe. To want them in a way that lasts.”

His therapist says, closing his eyes against the tears that were clearly gathering there. Bucky can hardly see past the blur in his. He anchors himself with the tapping of three fingers on a scarred chest and tries to breathe.

(Safe…there wasn’t a way to make this feeling safe)

Chapter End Notes

I LOVE Bucky’s therapist, my guys. Listen, I will probably never mention it in-text, but this man owns like 15 cats. They live in a house outfitted entirely for cats. During his time as a POW (which he has never in his life fully disclosed - this guy has written EXTENSIVELY about why sharing every single experience is not vital to therapy and
can be counter-productive), local strays killed the rats in his cell block that used to fight him for scraps. A friend of his managed to win over one of the angrier cats (a hairless one with no claws and very sharp teeth) and it would occasionally bring them scraps of bread or fish.

Also, this guy knows Tony's therapist. How does he know her? She was one of the first people he interned for. She's really really old (Bucky's therapist looks older than he is).

The loss of his fingers is something he never discussed during his own extensive time in therapy (which actually hasn't ended to this day). Bucky is the only person who knows it is self-inflicted.
Don't Say, Just Do

Chapter Summary

A DND fighter flips everybody off, choosing to roll for charm instead of intimidation, and rolls a nat 20.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A month passes quietly. There are times when Bucky shouts himself hoarse in his room, trying to ward away the memories that hounded him. There are times when he assembles and disassembles his guns for hours on end. He doesn’t sleep much, but he at least has hours of something like peace (a mug of coffee warming his fingers or pressed against his forehead. He didn’t drink it. He just inhaled the steam and wished he were someone else).

Bucky has avoided the East Compound the entire time (the urge to trail his fingers over the machines, to pace a circuit of the gym stalking a trail he knew was there – it was too much. He dreamed about it). His therapist thinks it is time to change that. He’d called it exposure therapy (Bucky didn’t think it was time, but he wanted...he wanted).

After that quiet month, Bucky Barnes returns to participate in Avengers drills. His therapist comes with him, if only to sit on the sidelines (to contribute to a controlled environment as subtly as possible. To serve as a physical reminder of control - of flipping the safety on his guns). The grizzled old man is a true strategist, though. He’s using one trip for many purposes: he’s going to scope out Steve (a potential client, he’d admitted), keep Bucky calm, and he wants to observe Bucky in action ("I hear you fight better than you emote."
He said blithely, "So let's see that. Maybe I'll learn something.

It reminds Bucky of the ever-circling thought that people only ever wanted to see half of him - this man was willing to look at both (he’s pathetically grateful for it).

Bucky’s therapist hobbles into the room a few minutes after Bucky. He leans heavily on his prosthetic and Bucky watches him from his position at Steve’s back. He can clearly see Steve’s internal debate about whether or not he should lend the old codger a hand. Bucky just shakes his head ruefully.

"He'll bite your hand off if you offer it, Steve. That or he'll cut off your leg to prove a point."

He whispers, making his friend laugh (a familiar sound. The serum hadn’t changed Steve’s voice much. Bucky was always grateful for that). Bucky tosses an arm across Steve’s shoulder as his therapist glances back at him, sharp eyes taking in his almost-relaxed stance. Steve catches his eye and salutes him as a fellow serviceman (it fills Bucky with a swell of familiar affection. He loved watching Steve love on people. For such an angry little fucker, he somehow managed to fit some affection into his shrivelled heart).

As his therapist settles down next to Colonel Danvers (she salutes him, too. It keeps the tiny smile on
Bucky’s face alive for a few more seconds), Tony Stark lopes in. He’s wearing his black and gold undersuit, skin-tight and attention-grabbing. His eyes, unconcealed by either contacts or glasses for the first time, glitter with mirth as he whispers something to Colonel Danvers. She turns scarlet and swats at him, complaining about him undermining her authority, while Tony laughs (the sound of it is rich and golden. After so long without seeing him, Bucky feels like he’s standing in the sun. It’s a bad thought, but...).

Muscle tightens under Bucky’s arm – Steve has gone tense as a board. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Natasha wilt. But Bucky feels...

He feels ok. Almost good.

Tony turns to Bucky’s therapist, a question forming on his lips. He begins to make rapid-fire motions with his hands and Bucky’s therapist looks bewildered (it’s a funny look on such a fierce old man’s face – Bucky was beginning to think that the guy was never going to stop looking like somebody out of a fantasy novel). Tony’s eyes illuminate fully (glowing with liquid light) and a tiny projection appears in his hand. Bucky can see that it’s of articulated fingers and his own twitch in response. The fingers wave and form a thumbs-up. Tony’s posture betrays just the slightest hint of anxiety past the bluster he’s putting on - he’s really scared that the old man won’t take his presentation well (a gift not wanted. Bucky hates that he can relate).

Slowly, with clear effort, the bluster melts away and Tony smiles (a tiny tremulous thing that makes Bucky’s breath catch with longing). He says something, Bucky’s therapist nods, and the hologram moves off of Tony’s fingers to play over his hand as a gauntlet. Bucky’s therapist twists his now complete hand around a few times, then makes it give Tony the middle finger.

Tony looks helplessly charmed. Colonel Danvers, notorious hardass, looks charmed. Bucky is pretty sure if he looked over his shoulder at the rabble surrounding him, they’d be charmed, too (was this a designated Avengers trait? A love of sass?).

Bucky is more charmed that Tony had allowed the simulation to do that - that he’d set a portion of his mind aside just to let an old man flip him off.

He knows he’s barely made any progress (there was a SIG Sauer rifle in his room waiting for cleaning and care to attest to that. He took the damn thing apart nightly). He knows how little this moment really means. But the fact that he can watch this scene and feel (almost) good makes him want that progress. Want it for real (to flick on the safety).

Tony folds away his simulations, letting them dissolve in a sparkle of light instead of suddenly being gone (the phantom pain of missing limb, severed from him so quickly, hits Bucky between heartbeats. He wonders if Tony knows that pain. He wonders about the arc reactor a lot - its absence and its symbolic presence). He shakes Bucky’s therapist’s hand, then pats Colonel Danvers on the shoulder. He lingers there for a moment, something warm passing between them.

One of the children calls him and he turns. For one paralyzing second (his skin tingles and feels his focus snapping into place), Tony’s content gaze is directed at Bucky. It wavers with uncertainty, but when Bucky turns his own gaze downwards, Tony’s eyes don’t lose their light (Bucky feels good... right?).

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Tony feels lighter somehow (it was a bit like free-fall. His stomach was swooping and his pulse was
thundering, but he was weightless). He hadn’t realized how much Barnes’ attention had weighed him down (pinned him in place) until the man had made a conscious effort to take it away. He hadn’t realized how much he had decided the attention was his own responsibility, something he would have to act against if he wanted it to stop, until Barnes had done something about it for him.

It felt like a favour. It was…strange.

Rogers and Romanoff still watched him constantly, however their gazes held so much less weight. They didn’t come with nearly as much internal conflict, fear, or responsibility. Tony was afraid of them, but he wasn’t afraid to hurt them.

He was afraid to hurt Barnes, though (kicking a man when he was down wasn’t something he wanted to do twice). He could admit that now.

Tony rolls the idea of Barnes on the rooftop around a few times and tries contrasting it with Steve or Natasha. He finds himself just as worried for them. The anger still simmers, but he doesn’t really want to hurt them either. Wasn’t afraid to, but didn’t want to (he almost wished he wanted to. It was easier, somehow. Maybe they weren’t actually much simpler than Barnes. Fuck, don’t think about it Tony).

Kamala, Peter, and Donny practically fuse themselves to Tony the second he gets close enough, grinning impishly at RiRi (who refused to take part in their games in an effort to prove her maturity. It was precious).

“What did Carol say about Uncle Rhodey’s little confession!”

Kamala asks him, spidering her fingers up his arm and into his hair (she loved the chin length curls he was sporting now).

“Does she liiiiiike him?”

Peter asks, letting go of Tony to walk backwards while facing him. Tony grins at him.

“She had quite the reaction.”

He says,

”In fact, I think she’s ready to do something about it…”

The kids are waiting breathlessly and Tony can barely hold back a snicker.

“She even told me one of her biggest secrets!”

He announces. Peter’s eyes go wide and glittery (he was an even bigger Shoujo heroine than Kamala! Tony knew he loved romcoms, but this degree of swooning meant that Peter belonged in an anime. Tony should make him some magical girl weaponry…). Only Donny was beginning to look suitably suspicious at Tony’s theatrics.

“Her secret…is that hearing she’s beautiful undermines her authority, despite the ‘intimidating’ my platypus tagged onto it. So remember kids, if you want to usurp our fearless leader, just compliment her extremely powerful physique!”
The children scream and try to pile on Tony for his trick, RiRi included (she loved Rhodey to death and was incredibly sour about his interest in Carol. It was hilarious). He lets Bleeding Edge out of his bones and, with a whoop of joy, sails out of their reach.

“Today’s exercise,”

He tells them through the coms over their shrieks of rage,

“Is apprehend Iron Man, enemy of love and romance!”

It takes three hours of breathless laughter and daring teamwork for the children to bring Tony down. By that time the Avengers simulation is over and they have an audience.

Tony spirals in gorgeous fractals (allowing Friday to colour in his path on the HUD with fun pastels – he was making an art piece!), flirting with Veronica while RiRi tried to recapture her attention, and sticking Peter’s webs to Donny (who promptly froze them off and tried to freeze Peter too, the temperamental brat). He can see Kamala lurking in the shadows, stretching out her limbs and connecting them to thin strands of spider silk. He’s pretty interested in how the strategy will keep Iron Man down.

RiRi loops in close to him, shutting down Veronica momentarily. Her armour is lighter and more maneuverable than his, so she ducks around his feet while drawing Donny’s ice up an extra thin strand of spider silk. Tony can see a cocoon building, though it’s only visible as vibrations through Friday (Peter’s webs could probably go microscopic if they tried hard enough...Tony might have to drag the kid down to the lab for a day if there was time). Tony asks Friday to draw up a whole map, curious if the kids are going to freeze him, bring buildings down on his head, or tie up his limbs.

The answer is ultimately all three. Kamala was the puppet master deciding which strategy to employ when; her threads were acting as a series of anchors for each.

Tony chuckles as he lets the freezing take place. His armour is resistant to ice adherence, but the webbing gave it something to stick to. It was clever - no doubt RiRi had employed this portion of things (good on her). Once his legs are stuck, he announces,

“No need for the buildings, thanks Kamala. I don’t particularly enjoy getting squished.”

She laughs (always the brightest bubbliest sound in the room), bounding out of the shadows, sliding over the ice track Donny created for her. She wraps her arms around Tony, morphing them into shackles.

“Do you surrender, Infamous Iron Man?”

She asks in her best hero voice. He flips up his faceplate and tries out a villainous scowl,

“I would’ve gotten away with it,”

He says (ignoring RiRi’s droll “with what”)

“If it weren’t for you meddling-“
And is cut off by Peter’s excited,

“Rooby dooby doo!!”

In the audience, Rhodey laughs (the rich belly laughs from Tony’s teen years of shitty cooking experiments and video game tournaments with robots. It was Tony’s favourite sound in the world. He had used it as a text tone for years before Rhodey caught him). He locks eyes with Tony and a rapid-fire exchange begins.

“You are a lot like a Scooby Doo villain. Evil corporate genius, weird facial hair, face like a rat-“

“Hey!”

“A weakness to children, dogs, and harebrained schemes.”

“Rude!”

“Didn’t you try to paint Dum-E like the Mystery Machine once?”

“Rhodey, that was on request! Don’t embarrass Dum-E like this when he can’t even defend himself!”

And now Tony can see it, the grin of sweet revenge on Rhodey’s face. He flails at him, but he’s still trapped in ice.

“And wasn’t there that one time you dressed up as Vel-“

Rhodey’s voice cuts out as Vision slaps his hand over his mouth. Tony pings him an electronic high five that has Vision’s mouth curving into a delighted smile (though he hadn’t quite gotten the timing down right. Smiles just APPEARED on his face). Rhodey scowls while Vision blithely says,

“Sorry, Sir. An old protocol must’ve activated. You know I would never shut you up on purpose.”

Tony chokes a bit (because Vision was a straight savage referencing Jarvis like that, but simultaneously so funny! So dry! He loved it). Rhodey licks Vision’s hand until he lets go.

“You didn’t have a body back then, you robo-dick!”

He bursts out before wiping his tongue off against his sleeve (Vision looks vaguely offended). There’s a quiet huff, the slightest exhale of a chuckle, that just barely catches Tony’s attention. When he seeks out the source, Barnes is smiling shyly at his own feet. He doesn’t look at Tony (even though his fingers twitch a little bit towards him before curling into a loose fist, thumb stroking over index. It makes Tony’s heart lurch strangely).

"C’mon Vis, my favourite child, free me from this Hell Sphere before Rhodey spills all of my secrets.”

Tony’s requests, letting Vision effortlessly slice through the kid’s trap (they groan in disappointment. Knowing them, they probably would’ve tried to doodle on Tony’s face or something if he stayed stuck there). Barnes quietly pads away, dragging Steve off with him as Tony debriefs the kids (even though Barnes’ footfalls stutter at the door and Tony can FEEL the eyes on the back of his head,
trailing down his neck to his spine to his...). It’s nice - being given this privacy. Natasha watches him for a few more moments before slinking away, dragging all of the other Rogues with her.

Heart beating a little faster than usual and a smile firmly in place, Tony drags Vision and Rhodey to the roof. It’s been too long since they had a movie night (and he was a human projector now). The kids join in and, after a few hours, so does Matt. He nudges Vision with his shoulder and they begin to converse quietly about some legal journal (he’d bitched at Tony for hours about getting access to Braille).

Luke finds them all there in the morning, fast asleep and shivering in the cold. When he heads downstairs, Jess silently passes him some blankets. They just intend to wrap everybody up before wrapping themselves up in each other. Somehow though, they wind up joining the pile (it’s a nice way to get to sleep, somebody at everybody’s back).

Carol laughs at the footage later when Friday shows her. She gently traces the line of Rhodey’s arm flung over Tony’s shoulders and breathes past the squeeze of her heart. She doesn’t regret taking this job, not anymore.

Chapter End Notes

**Bucky’s Therapist:** *flips everybody off*
**Bucky’s Therapist:** I am a bitter old man!
**Bucky’s Therapist:** *covered in scars from people he has fought*
**Bucky’s Therapist:** I have killed countless times! Fear me!
**Literally All of the Avengers:** This man is precious and must be protected at all costs.
Tony in Wonderland

Chapter Summary

Tony’s life has become a funhouse mirror, therefore it’s about time for a beach episode.

Chapter Notes

WoahhhHHHHhhHHHHHHHHH it’s a double update kindof day! I really want to move on into the next bit because I finished it and it is SO FUN! SO FUN!!!! I can't really resist. Plus I wanted to give people some extra content before I have to jet off to a fencing competition for the whole weekend. Believe it or not, we’re finally getting close to the end of the pre-written bits and bobs. I wonder where the story will go from here?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The thing keeps happening. The thing with Barnes. The weird thing with Barnes that Tony doesn’t understand ('Oh time, thou must untangle this, not I. It is too hard a knot for me t'untie.' Tony didn’t have half the facts he needed to understand this development and the temptation to look at security footage or something was powerful. He could wait, though. Tony Stark and patience could go together. It could happen).

Weeks of simulation pass with Barnes ducking his head when Tony passes by, when Tony enters his field of view, when Tony’s voice brushes by his ears as he struts over to Carol or Rhodey. Tony knows Barnes is still tracking him (the laser stare was powerful enough that Tony thinks he would detect it across a clean mile). He knows Barnes is still listening. But when his spine stiffens and his breathing comes short, Barnes always retreats with that look in his eyes.

He’s like an old and apologetic cat living with a mouse. Inbred hunting instincts won’t leave it alone, but it won’t move in for the kill. It just sits there, pathetic and starving, as if that would make it seem friendlier. That or it was a Cheshire Cat situation ('Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad').

Natasha is the same tune, different story. She stops with the sorrowful staring. She simply puts forth more effort to tuck her sadness away and to seek out his needs. He knows Natasha has been trained on how to work between the cracks in your heart, however this somehow feels less practiced (more honest, if anything Natasha does could be considered honest). She tries harder to bridge the gap between the Old and New Avengers, too, frequently acting as Hope’s second in command (she still gravitates to Steve first, still grits her teeth when Steve’s whole form slumps, but she isn’t caving to it. It makes Tony wonder if the last time was just that...just her giving up).

Tony can’t answer her unspoken plea, but Vision begins to work with her more closely. Vision gives Clint extra attention too, giving the two of them more room to work together (Tony is happy to see Vision with something to do. He’d been strangely lonely ever since Wanda had been shuffled off with Strange to parts unknown...Tony hadn’t paid attention to where she was or when she had gone, but
he could see the effect). The two of them finally begin to interact entirely in facial expressions, sign, and minute gestures again. Tony almost missed seeing it, no matter how badly he wanted to grind Clint’s face into the dirt (that fucker hadn’t apologized to Rhodey yet. Not that Rhodey would let him, but hey, it’s the thought that counts with his sourpatch).

The extra help also gives Natasha space to approach Barnes.

The two of them together dominate the field. Barnes is usually heavy, solid, prowling like either a predator or a disappearing like a ghost. But with Natasha he moves like a dancer. There’s a certain lightheartedness to them sometimes that even manages to make Steve smile (Tony periodically tuned into Extremis for updates, just quick checks, and had heard several pieces from Russian ballets vibrating through the West Compound. The Rite of Spring was a favourite because of course it was). At least, it makes him smile until Jess hurls them both across the room through sheer spite alone (Tony is surprised she managed it if he’s being honest. He’ll never underestimate the power of spite again).

Steve doesn’t smile for awhile after that (jaw clenched, fists clenched, everything always clenched).

Jess is the biggest hold out on associating with any Rogues in any way. There’s something mean and flighty in her gaze whenever it lands on Barnes. Barnes wears a matching expression whenever he sees her (no longer an old and apologetic cat). It bothers Tony, but the thought of going over there and interfering has his heart hammering and his hands going numb (a phantom pain spreading from his chest down his arm).

Peter rescues him from himself (the kid always managed to. Tony had no idea how, but someday he was going to pay Peter back twofold). Since the Integrated Avengers were doing better and had clearly become fatigued by the constant drills, Peter wanted to do a joint exercise. He’s been eying Steve’s shield with the clear intention of playing capture the flag with it (mumbling to himself about it out loud – how on Earth did this kid keep his identity a secret? Tony had seen him pull off his mask in the middle of a street before, too). And Tony...well, he wasn’t done being petty quite yet (he actually missed T’Challa fiercely, though business at the compound and business in Wakanda chained them both down).

So, of course they hash out a plan.

‘Cap-ture the Shield’ (people said Tony sucked at naming things. People were wrong) is a disarming game - Tony’s kids and Tony VS the Integrated Avengers. The goal was to capture and stockpile weapons. You were safe in your own base, vulnerable to capture in the opponents, and could be jailed if you were caught when crossing sides. Tony’s kids would have the advantage of not really carrying weapons, therefore scoring points from them would be hard. Jailing nets less points than weapons capture, though the numbers weren’t perfectly consistent (based on a careful combat algorithm Peter had slapped together and wouldn’t reveal the details of). However, if the Integrated Avengers managed to capture all of the kids and their weapons while only sacrificing a few of their people and even fewer of their weapons, they could win.

That won’t happen though, because Tony intends to grind them into the dirt. He hopes it’ll be a good way to dispel remaining tension...and to make use of a double agent (when he tells her his plans, Jess grins at him in that way of hers that makes him feel like he’d run into her in a dark dirty back alley).

He takes a few days to tweak some of his combat simulations into a massive maze with an open forest and tall office buildings. He intentionally makes the terrain bizarre (“Nothing that is so, is so”).
Nothing is what it seems. Nothing, populating it with small robots that look like bugs for surveillance and general fuckery (he could finally test out Extremis for real). The sim is absolutely monstrous and would require way more base structures for the holograms to interact with than he currently had available. He was going to have to order in some outside help (and spend some of the council’s money, oh goody).

While he’s in the lab, he brushes over the latest enhancements for War Machine. Quietly, he forwards them to Helen for protections neither he or Rhodey had the guts to ask for before (biological protections that considered every single delicate nerve in the human body). Helen has been busy traveling the world, but Tony doesn’t want her to think she’s been forgotten (he’s worried lately that a lot of people feel forgotten when it comes to him).

Since he’s already sending out emails, he sends the simulation plans to Pepper. He wants to be a petty asshole and he doesn’t know anyone better at that game than her. Her contributions would likely create a whole new element of frustrating Tony never could. While thinking about the true essence of pettiness (something he was striving for and falling short of lately), he doubles back and sends the plans to T’Challa and Helen too. He only attaches one piece of context:

“Let’s make sure the kids win.”

Tony is shocked by how quickly he gets answers. He’s even more surprised to see that Shuri has taken over his simulation, expanding it and breathing new life through every line. Her coding is...brilliant (it snakes between the lines Tony has written like a water snake. It is seamless). She’s thrown in a series of traps that Tony’s kids, fliers or environmental manipulators, can easily avoid but will likely provide stumbling blocks for the grounded Avengers. Tony cracks open her presentation (done in a program he’s never seen before but wants to see again) like a bedtime story and eagerly digs in.

He calls T’Challa when he’s done just to hang up. It brings him a special kind of joy. He calls Shuri, too (though he doesn’t hang up - he’s got too much to discuss with her).

Helen and Pepper have teamed up, sending him a joint presentation. Hysterically, it’s set up like a TED talk. Pepper is using the Stark Industries private stage and everything (see? Dramatic and petty. All of Tony’s best friends were like this, whether people realize or not. God, he loves her). They’ve implemented puzzle locks that are dependent on solving SAT questions. Tony nearly pisses himself laughing when he sees a standard medical school interview question. He’s gonna put these locks on all of Shuri’s traps. It was the perfect Saw scenario (but less incredibly gory and gross. Rhodey had better not tell anybody how scared Tony was of those movies).

The final version of the game is presented to Carol over virgin margaritas on a holographic beach, courtesy of Tony’s newfound human projector abilities. She’s in a Ms Marvel bikini and Tony has every intention to tell Rhodey all about it (her biceps are the stuff of dreams and her thighs honestly look like they could fell entire civilizations). Tony plays Extremis over his skin in a copy of the bikini’s pattern (even adding a full bikini bottom lightshow underneath his swim trunks) while he speaks, just because he knows Carol won’t break (she does side-eye him, though. She tells him he wishes he could pull off this look. She’s not wrong).

She loves the game idea. If she were anyone else, she’d be howling in laughter at the ingenuity of it, of the sheer ridiculous applicability - it would push everyone to succeed while reminding the
Avengers that sometimes the odds would be stacked against them (*it was also fun. Fun was something that the current simulations definitely lacked*). She’s Carol though, so she listens to it all and gives him some suggestions with a straight face, sipping on the peach dragonfruit margarita Tony had blended up before she got there.

Everything is a-go...except for one final detail.

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The final detail is holed up in the West Compound, so Tony sneaks on over. Friday sends out a ping ahead of him to his goal and he uses the cameras to navigate without being caught (*this was enemy territory*). Eventually he winds up on the roof (*that he had begun to subconsciously refer to as Barnes’, what with the holes in it and the time he spent up there*), where a door opens behind him. His goal is there.

Tony doesn’t turn around at the near-silent footfalls.

“In two days, I’m going to be taking part in a sim with the kids against the Integrated Avengers.”

He says, spreading his arms wide and still facing forward.

“We are going to win without your help. But,”

He swings himself around, star-shaped sunglasses tucked into his hair (*adding to the drama of the moment, at least in Tony's mind. He was wearing a matching tie and cufflinks*), and slam a fist into his open palm. He points at Natasha,

“With your help, we could destroy the competition. What do you say, double agent?”

Natasha grins (*sharp-edged and so familiar it ached*) and Tony finds he can’t regret giving her the chance to be on his side again (*the chance to erase the past*).

They’re going to be beautiful together (*Love sought is good, but given unsought is better*).

Chapter End Notes

**Bucky:** *gives Tony the space he has so clearly demanded*

**Tony:** *squints*

**Tony:** Being respected? In my own house?

**Tony:** Suspicious

The quotes are from Alice in Wonderland and Twelfth Night. Twelfth Night and The Tempest are Tony and Rhodey's favourite Shakespeare plays since they feature the most enigmatic characters. There was a time period where they would both hit on people at bars as various Shakespeare characters. Basically they had to get at least one number without breaking character if they wanted use of their shared room for the night. Whoever lost would have to go rent a motel room, lmao.
Also, does anybody know anything about Rite of Spring? The premiere of Igor Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring is perhaps the most famous scandal in the history of the performing arts! Natasha LOVES it - it was one of the first pieces Bucky ever learned and it's the first he ever taught her. They dance it exactly as it is meant to be danced, with dangerous abandon, with a healthy twist of Russian folk dance. It's fucking incredible.
Tony is coming for Bucky's Johnson and Steve is getting sucked...into something. Heh. Happy Valentine's, y'all!

On game day, Tony and Natasha sweep into the room in matching crimson and black suits. Pepper had put together the concept with Hope's help and sent in the tailors, telling Tony exactly how much she liked suits designed to show off his back (“Your shoulders!” She announced, causing Hope to giggle from her position on Tony’s couch, “Your traps! The way your entire back ripples! I swear to god, your back and your arms on any man is enough to make me fall for them!”).

There’s a red hourglass design on the back, framing the expanse of Tony’s shoulders and narrow waist (red piping emphasizing the waist further since, unlike Natasha, his suit can’t flare out again at the base of his teeny tiny hips. Male biology was always trying to ruin his fashion statements), and outlining Natasha’s hourglass figure perfectly. Natasha’s hair has been freshly chopped into a pixie cut that’s red as blood. Tony knew what it symbolized: no more changing faces, though Natasha would always be a liar (“I am indeed not her fool, but her corrupter of words.” Did this make Nat his jester? Because they were about to make a fool out of everybody…).

They make for an intensely striking pair. Tony’s dark brown hair curls softly, tumbling out longer than Natasha’s pin-straight red. His tanned skin makes her paleness seem almost ethereal, while she made him glow (more than Extremis usually did anyway). Their gazes are both at their most piercing and determined; Pepper had enforced that they should match their persona to their clothes. They’re both dressed to kill - Natasha’s suit is only a prototype of what he intends her to have later (unarmoured for now, simply resting on top of her old suit), but Extremis has literally woven the armour through Tony’s little number. Furthermore, Tony hasn’t bothered drawing false age lines on his face today. Everybody here knew what he was. He had nothing to hide (sortof).

Unable to resist and perhaps unwilling to (“You don’t need to constantly challenge yourself, Tony.” His therapist had huffed, “Exposure therapy is effective for PTSD, but over-exposure is a set back. Please, be reasonable.” Tony had never been reasonable a day in his life), Tony lets his eyes fall deliberately on Barnes. There’s so much to pick at with Barnes’ little problem and Tony can’t just leave it be. He can’t help but test him a smidge (or a foot, or a mile, or the whole nine yards. He was poking the bear and he knew it. But Barnes was weird and it was bothering the Hell out of him).

Looking at Barnes is a mistake because Tony isn’t prepared for what he sees.

Barnes’ eyes are wide and blown with hunger. The blue in them has been drowned out by black (making him look even more like a predator than usual. Yay. Just what Tony needed – poking the bear indeed). He’s perfectly still, not even breathing, all of his focus on drinking in the sight of Tony in a way he’d been clearly avoiding for over a month now (like a really goddamn thirsty man in the desert – there’s desperation there). Tony can’t even see a trace of that resistance anymore.
It's electrifying. And terrifying. Mostly terrifying, like being tazed.

Tony tightens his hold on Extremis because he isn't willing to give up on poking the bear now. He conceals even the slightest indication of fear, cocking a single eyebrow at Barnes. He even bares a little hint of teeth (he feels like he's about to be eaten alive-).

Barnes swallows heavily. He shivers. It would be invisible to somebody who wasn't enhanced, but Tony caught it. The contraction of Barnes’ thick muscle, the shift in his thighs and stomach, the flutter just above his hips...

Well - that answered one question of Tony’s (Barnes wasn’t just trying to say “thank you” or “sorry” anymore).

Like a man possessed (by his own stupidity if nothing else), Tony deliberately threads his fingers through Natasha’s short hair. He smooths his fingers down to the roots and grips them lightly, tilting her head back. Natasha is a sly woman and she understands immediately. She lets him do it, exposing her throat to him submissively (hah, as if) as his grip tightens. Her head leans against his shoulder heavily and her body slumps into his side. They both watch Barnes’ reaction closely (Natasha with slitted eyes, luxuriating in her current position): he draws a shuddering breath through wet open lips before squeezing his eyes shut, letting his head fall back and his spine arch in an exact mirror of Natasha (absolutely identical, like Tony was gripping his hair instead-).

“Yasha always liked beautiful powerful things. Especially if they could kill him.”

Natasha whispers (her pupils are dilated and Tony can see her pulse fluttering which was... extremely unexpected. Tony may have miscalculated literally everything about this interaction) which tells Tony more about Natasha and the Winter Soldier than he suspects anyone else knows (than anyone else wants to know, Jesus). Tony releases her, carefully refusing to look at Barnes again, and murmurs,

“We’re going to win.”

Natasha gives him a secretive little smile and heads off to her people (a flush still riding high on her cheeks). Steve quickly shifts his gaze between her and Tony, scarlet on his own skin, but Tony stubbornly ignores him. He’s already learned one too many lessons for one day. He’s gonna make like an ostrich – his head is going right in the sand.

Cap-ture the Shield is a riot of fun. It's every ridiculous daydream Tony has ever had come to life.

It feels like...it feels like Iron Man’s first test flight (the bots gathered round, Butterfingers eying the suit with bitter jealousy, Dum-E ready to put out the flames, U whirling in delighted circles, and Jarvis...always having his back. Acting as his wings). There are bright-eyed kids on every side of Tony, chattering through his coms, laughing up a storm. Their happiness is infectious. It only takes five minutes for Tony to open up a channel to Rhodey, feeding him everything he sees.

"You’re in the suit, honeybun.”

He tells him, breathless with the feeling of sharing this (he wished sometimes he could've shared that first test flight, that Rhodey was standing in the shop by his side...he could make it right now),
“You’re right in here with me, babycakes, and we are FLYING!”

It only takes a heartbeat (shared because Rhodey had always had Tony’s heart, right from the first time he’d ruffled his hair and protected him from himself) for Rhodey to get into it. For him to whoop from his position on the sidelines with Carol (for him to smile the way he had when he’d piloted his first plane, the way he had when him and Tony took off to California, when they’d decided for real to be brothers for life).

”A soul in tension that's learning to fly
Condition grounded but determined to try~”

Tony sings, getting Friday to hold off on playing the instrumentals. He was gonna get Rhodey in good with Carol - the coms were open for her perusing. He knew she had a weak spot for singers a mile wide (and he knew Rhodey had a voice that hadn't seen proper use since their mid-20s and maybe Rhodey's childhood gospel choir).

“Can't keep my eyes from the circling skies
Tongue-tied and twisted just an earth-bound misfit, I-”

Rhodey belts out, not quite there yet, not totally in his rockstar space. Tony was going to change that.

”Friction lock, set
Mixtures, rich
Propellers, fully forward
Flaps, set, ten degrees
Engine gauges and suction, check!”

Tony is really putting his lungs into it now, barely passable, but he’d always loved that rock let you have a shitty voice or just talk-sing (he can carry a tune when he was talk-singing. Rhodey always called him on it when they were in Vegas to do karaoke or get drunk or gamble, said it was cheating, but that had never stopped Tony). He can feel Rhodey gearing up for it. He was so fucking ready, quickly pulling open a little window to show Carol on his HUD (her eyes wide and delighted, Hell yes!).

”Above the planet on a wing and a prayer,
My grubby halo, a vapor trail in the empty air,
Across the clouds I see my shadow fly
Out of the corner of my watering eye
A dream unthreatened by the morning light
Could blow this soul right through the roof of the night~”

Rhodey is fully in it now, putting on this crazy twist that he’d picked up from the live show they’d attended god...when Tony was 30 (that show had been insane - a full choir in attendance, every note pitching high and mighty in a way that always stole the breath right out of Tony's lungs)? Tony pipes in the guitar, the drums, the wild sound of industry (machines from his own shop - his girl was getting inventive), and delights in Carol’s starstruck expression. Peter’s voice quickly joins in with an excited cry of,

“Pink Floyd!”

And then
“Tongue tied and twisted, just an earth bound misfit!”

Kamala calls the classic (Tony frowns and whispers “Prog rock” at the same time Rhodey does) rock ‘classic dad’ music. Donny just cackles at the idea of Rhody getting sucked into something so easily (if only he knew) and RiRi, when Tony checks, looks like Christmas came early. Tony loves it. He loves Peter asking Karen to start up TNT too, especially when him and Rhodey yell,

“Dynamiiiiite!”

In the same second like they were in college again.

It takes awhile to get everyone under control after that, just about the length of time it takes them to reach their base. Once they get in and see the holoboard set up, they turn to Tony with eager eyes. He pulls out a strategy, one that will let each of them go rogue without losing their common goal because Tony didn’t want to overshadow them tonight, and smiles like a shark.

“This,”

He says, blowing out the hologram with Extremis and casting the room with scattered blue light,

“Is how we’re gonna knock the Avengers down a peg or two.”

The Avengers base is fraught with tension despite the light-hearted concept of the simulation. The way Tony had looked (deadly, devilish), the fact that he was even participating in the first place, meant that this was so much more than it appeared in the surface. They knew the rules, were confident they could win even though they were handicapped, but something felt...off.

Jessica Jones is lounging in an uninterested way that tells everyone that she’s going to be backing Tony up until he tried to swipe something from her (Jessica would love to tussle with Tony if she had the right excuse. Everyone was 80% sure most of her affection was displayed through violence). Natasha Romanoff is dressed just like Tony, practically screaming double agent in a way nobody has the guts to ask about (not while she looked like that. The Black Widow aesthetic had never been stronger). Especially not when Wasp looked so incredibly smug about it all. Jessica and Natasha aren’t looking at each other, so there’s clearly something happening there, too.

Luke Cage squints at Jessica for a few seconds suspiciously before he brings up that this simulation is a great chance for them to try integrated leadership since it will be fairly easily. They could afford to mess around a bit. Wasp agrees since she wants to have fun, but also because she was sneakily bridge building. Steve jumps at the chance (so eager to have a full team again – Bucky was onto the guy. He still felt bad about how lonely Steve had been lately, especially with Bucky taking so much time for himself).

Bucky agrees to their strategy, all the while planning to do some scouting of his own. Tony was in the field with his kiddies and some double agents - there was no way he was going for anything less than a full-scale operation (Bucky had seen plenty of Iron Man videos. He knew what the man was capable of. He could change plans on a dime, and he’d been training those kids for ages to do the same).
Bucky should...no, he should have fun. Take this as a step off the battlefield. Instead of being a challenge, this could be...fun (he tries not to let his thoughts turn back to the way Tony had looked at him, how he’d tipped Natasha’s head, dressed to kill, dressed to match. Fuck. FUCK. He could be something other than desperate - he was going to have fun himself and, if he happened to see Tony, so be it).

The Avengers leave their base, strategy established, and that’s when Bucky realizes their first error: Vision is smiling (Vision NEVER smiles). They had more than two double agents. Vision looks right at him, taps into his com and says (without opening his mouth...creepily),

“They don’t need my help, Sergeant Barnes.”

They were screwed. They were absolutely doomed and...

Bucky was looking forward to seeing what would happen. It’d been awhile since he had both a physical and mental challenge.

Two hours later, torn between laughter (Sam had been trapped in a gravity defying bog that had asked him to answer an English question about the Catcher in the Rye, holy shit), joy (he’d been thrown out of a tree BY THE TREE. There were bug robots. Spider-Man had kissed one of them. It was incredible), and sheer exasperation (he had had his favourite gun stolen by an extremely powerful magnetic field that had somehow avoiding messing around with his shoulder. His gun had been flat out targeted. He had launched two failed attempts to retrieve it, one of which resulted in it being dipped in mud. There was SO MUCH MUD here. He would be scrubbing the barrel for weeks), Bucky doesn’t know why on Earth he looked forward to this.

Tony is a fucking menace in the field. He carries the kids on his back, dive-bombing the Avengers base, spiraling high and taking impossible corners. RiRi is his mirror image, heckling Steve for his shield constantly. Tony refuses to help her, citing his belief in her abilities, and then cackles as he loops away to rescue Donny from jail for the tenth time (all the kids greeted him with the arms outstretched, so trustingly and prepared to be yanked into the sky. Bucky wondered how that felt. He knew that Steve knew – the look on his face made that obvious). Donny makes it snow as he escapes (turning the thin sheets of water deceptively speckled around the area into deadly ice for the FIFTH TIME).

Steve gets hit by a bizarre environmental trap (fucking QUICKSAND!?) when he can’t figure out the right parameters for a population modeling question, mostly because he’s never heard of the subject (considering how his success rate was increasing, Steve was going to know every high school and college subject by the end of this sim. It’s making Bucky fucking lose it). Steve has the shield jammed underneath his body to keep it safe from RiRi’s persistence and it makes him look like a turtle trapped on his back (while also slowly descending into a sand pit). Bucky’s laughter and inattention loses him a knife to Natasha’s quick fingers. He swipes at her, closing in quickly, when Jessica appears out of the woods. She picks Natasha up and just… fucking catapults her over the maze and into Tony’s territory. Tony himself catches her, wrapping his arms around her waist as she deposits Bucky’s favourite knife into a compartment in the armour.

"I’m coming for your Johnson next.”

Tony tells him, making Bucky splutter before grabbing at his gun in realization. He doesn’t even get to reply (wait, shit, he’s not supposed to, right?) before Tony is jetting off again.
Bucky’s charmed. He’s so charmed. **Fuck** (*tactical pants were not good for spontaneous-*)

"Buckyyyyyyyyy!"

Steve screams, and Bucky is off again. He had a punk-ass Capturtle to save.

**Chapter End Notes**

Bucky has, without a doubt, let past lovers pull his hair. That's all I'm gonna say for now. Also look out for part TWO of game day shenanigans coming to a fanfic website near you!

**Avengers:** Capture the flag? Haha this a child's game!

**Avengers (2 hours in):** *covered in mud, having flashbacks, bleeding from places they didn't know they could bleed*

**Avengers (2 hours in):** I see...it is called a child's game...because only children can survive...

**Bucky:** *having a blast*

**Avengers:** Yep. Only children can survive

**Natasha:** *gleefully tossing people off cliffs and into traps*

**Avengers:** ...

**Avengers:** We begin to suspect Tony has it out for us specifically
Chaos Theory

Chapter Summary

Bucky becomes a cat chasing a laser, puts on drunk goggles, and ultimately discovers a new kink.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been hours and even Tony was beginning to lose track of the utter chaos that had descended upon game day (somewhere in the universe, Loki was eating his heart out).

Natasha had thrown herself into the kids’ jail and had been surrendering her weapons one by one, stacking their point count. Every time Tony needed to deploy her, he simply plucked her from jail (doing a hug and fly just to make the kids jealous) and let her wreak havoc with a dozen and one minor explosives and pranks from his suit (they don’t count as “weapons”). He literally gives her a slime bomb at one point. It makes Clint slip from a window (perfect for sniping) into an office building that was filled with water (unless that happened) that Donny freezes immediately.

Tony carves out the Clint chunk with his lasers and, cackling, passes it to Jess to carry deeper his territory. Clint screeches in rage from within his icy prison and quickly sets about freeing himself, but not before Jess steps over the team borders (poor Clint, thinking he was safe near his base when there were double agents afoot). Steve launches a daring rescue, still frustratingly with shield, and manages to free Clint (though he can’t get his bow from where Tony had superglued it to a tree, suck on THAT). However, he falls victim to a frustratingly worded physics question about an octopus and a hockey puck. It turns the trees around him into a Sleeping Beauty inspired thicket that he has to hack away at with the shield. In an attempt to save him, Sam is captured again (though he has cleverly hidden his wings elsewhere).

Hope is being stalked by Tony’s robot bugs. Hysterically, RiRi had inserted a bee mob response into the tiny bots. The vibrations resulting from it tickled Hope more than they hurt her, but still were effective at preventing her from stealing back weapons as she cried from laughter (RiRi was stealthily guiding her toward the border bit by bit...).

Kamala is in prison and being watched from a sniper position by Bucky Barnes. Tony had tried to save her a few times, however Barnes was too good to evade completely. The last time Tony had tried to sneak in, he’d nearly been caught by an incredibly basic SAT question about the significance of insignificant sentences (his response was “isn’t that paradoxical?” Before he had hastily given a better answer). He knew Pepper would love watching that footage later - he can hear Rhodey already losing it over the coms.

Peter’s web shooters are also a lost cause, guarded carefully by Matt. He’s using Tony’s bizarre environment to his ultimate advantage - so many different textures gave off different vibrations, making identifying everyone’s location easy for him. He’s also watching over RiRi’s itty bitty laser canon that he had swiped somehow from her hands (Tony had no idea when or why she’d pulled it out, but it was Matt’s now). Matt knew better than to cross the line and had no weapons to steal...so Tony was going to have to kidnap him.
He strategized with the kids. They could sacrifice one of their members to regain two weapons. Then, if they could take Matt prisoner and either gain one more prisoner or another weapon, they would win (according to Peter, at least). It’s a dummy plan, but Tony’s kids don’t know that. He’s aiming for crushing victory and he hasn’t even used half of Shuri’s little tweaks yet. He also knew that even though his kids had planned well, Steve would plan better and would take advantage of their charge to steal back Luke’s knuckle dusters, Bucky’s gun and knife, something of Natasha’s or Jess’, or Clint’s bow. If he got three weapons AND another one of the kids, his team could probably win. Tony wouldn’t let that happen.

The strategy is underway (distract, divide, conquer while taking advantage of the traps) while Tony quietly lays the groundwork for his own plan. Steve will never make it into his territory, not when he’s tricked Bucky Barnes right into Shuri’s optical illusion field (a building built like an MC Escher painting with a subtly shifting floor that would ruin any grounded persons day). If he disorients him heavily enough, Tony can use some super soldier adapted ropework to keep Barnes still as he chucks him in prison, banking on the kids swiping Matt (or RiRi continuing her Hope plan) or one other weapon as he causes utter chaos.

The kids clash with Vision and Luke, two heavy hitters who weren’t yet exhausted by traps, weird terrain, and Peter’s surprise attacks from every angle. Peter webs Vision’s eyes completely closed instantly (nice!) and RiRi, bless her soul, uses a jury-rigged reactor (“not a weapon!” She yells) to generate a Faraday cage that confuses Vision’s senses. Luke continues his charge, guided through a snaking series of maneuvers by RiRi into a room that immediately started rotating. Luke’s feet slip and the door of the room locks, asking for an answer about primary and secondary colour wheels. Luke screams in outrage, but the kids can’t celebrate yet - RiRi can’t escape without him being on her tail.

Steve uses the break in their lines to rush in with Clint. He answers his way through several possible traps, using his shield to shatter Donny’s ice and to try and pull Peter in close. Peter uses one of Steve’s powerful yanks to propel Donny (on ice smoothened terrain that spiraled up several thick vines and mushroom treetops) into enemy territory. Clint can’t snipe him without the bow, though he tries to heave a large rock to break the ice (it turns out to be foam. Tony LOVES what Shuri did to the place).

Peter and Steve face off while Luke and RiRi escape from the rotating room of doom. Taking advantage of his dizziness, she tips Luke into a gulch, though he rips off one of her boots as he goes. Her flight pattern is destabilized, so she lands and hobbles back to base to quickly work on the bee code to try and drag Hope further into their lines (she wasn’t worried about their weapons - Natasha and Jess had defense covered. Tony approved of her strategy). She’s done Tony a massive favour without even realizing it.

There’s a mirrored zone in the gulch, though nobody had entered that section of the field yet. Only Tony knew of its peculiar angles (the way it only caught images far above the ground to reflect), and so no one suspected a thing when they saw two red and gold armours duking it out with Luke.

Fools! They were all fools!

With his best maniacal laugh, Tony deactivates his stealth plating and bursts from the trees behind Barnes, making like he was headed for their jail again. Barnes fires several paintballs at him, all aimed to at possible weak points in the armour (he kept trying to find one. Tony hoped to Hell there weren’t any), but Tony divebombed towards the ground, twisting widely to the side. One paintball clipped him anyway, but it wasn’t “fatal” or even “injurious”, so he kept going.
He could actually hear Barnes snarl in frustration. A flicker of unease tried to work its way into his 
fun, but he batted it aside. He was going to do this. He was going to prove a point to himself (or die 
trying).

Tony feints at the jail again but Barnes doesn’t react. He’s watching Tony now for weaknesses. He 
has to really sell the act here if he wants the Winter Soldier to take the bait.

He quickly pries something from his little finger. A magnetic field springs up, starting to pull Kamala 
in by the ball-bearings in her boots (Tony had put roller skates in them...for reasons). She pops her 
wheels and gleefully begins tumbling towards him, not even considering that this isn’t going to work 
at all. Man, Tony loves these kids. They’ve got more faith in him than he has in himself (not that 
that’s hard or anything. Still, it’s the thought that counts!).

Barnes makes an outright chuffing sound (the kind that large land predators did…and that one 
monster in that Steven King book) this time, but past the ‘oh shit oh shit’ litany in his head, Tony 
thinks it might be a bit playful? Like when you’re fucking around with a tiger or something. It’s 
having a good time but could still probably kill you (could definitely still kill you).

The Winter Soldier comes crashing out of his perch, muscles pulling long and rolling under black 
leather (really, the super soldier serum wasn’t ‘fair) aannnnnndttddd Tony gets the impression it’s 
time to run. But he can’t give up the ghost too quickly - Barnes needs to believe his team is close 
 enough to victory that he should abandon the jail for capturing Tony instead. He darts for Kamala, 
still pulling her in with the field, aiming to get her just over the edge of her prison so she would be 
allowed to defend herself. He makes it look like a desperate effort, even setting off a tiny explosion 
behind her to propel her forward (she was cackling and urging him on).

Barnes heads for him with a full on murder strut, head low and gaze burning. Tony flies in low 
circles, relying on the angles to keep pulling Kamala forward magnetically while keeping him 
somewhat out of reach. He can see Barnes calculating where he would be next in less than a second 
(it would be entertaining for the guy to stumble into one of the advanced math traps. He’d probably 
do really well). Tony was running short on time and-

Oh shit. Oh shit!?!?

Barnes does a full on leap to catch Tony’s foot that catches Tony slightly (extremely) off-guard and 
off-balance. He quickly uses Extremis to yank the armour off of his skin, shrinking the spot Barnes 
was reaching for by a good few inches. He rolls to fix his flight path and sings,

“Tongue tied and twisted, just an earth bound misfittttt~”

To taunt his would-be captor. Kamala giggles and sings along while Barnes ignores her - he’s fully 
locked into his target now (fuuuuuuuuuck).

Tony executed a tight barrel roll, dropping to the ground and releasing a sonic wave through the dirt 
to roll Kamala even further towards the line. Barnes pounces like a wild cat, sprinting at a full tilt 
towards him. Tony releases another wave of energy into the dirt below, effectually liquefying it 
enough for Barnes to stumble. Tony takes off, but makes sure to keep up his appearances of planning 
to circle back to the jail. Barnes just...fucking powers out of the mud like it’s nothing, black leathers 
sloughing off dirt and wow, ok, Tony didn’t feel so bad about being scared now.

Barnes’ boots (were those…were those GX-8s? GORE-TEX? Hot damn, Tony kindof wanted to
know who had resupplied Barnes in Wakanda) leave deep indents in the ground and he pushes off after him. Tony weaves through the trees, taking a snaking bizarre path, desperately tracking updates from his own base and checking Fridays timer (he was on schedule, however barely). He snaps branches from the trees to block Barnes’ path, triggering traps as he goes and shouting answers only after Barnes has begun to plow his way through them like an unstoppable force (he hopes the traps are slowing him down, because it really doesn’t feel like they are).

“Hey, Belt Buckle,”

He calls, voice higher than intended,

“Where’s your Johnson?”

Because he can’t believe that the fucker left it behind (Tony had been hoping if he couldn’t catch Barnes he’d at least get the gun as a final fuck you. Also, he appreciated a good dick joke like fine malt whiskey). The only response he gets is a low ominous laugh (Tony is going to die. If not tonight, definitely some other time).

A hand nearly snatches his boot again. Tony knows better than to try the same trick as last time - his sensors have determined that Barnes is reaching for his real foot now. Instead he tries a new trick that he’s been dying to utilize for ages now. You see, Tony was sick of being grabbed by every two-bit villain capable of breaking a carnival grip-tester.

He takes the scaled surface of the armour and makes it molecularly smooth. Frictionless. Impossible to grasp by anything less than several tones of force (something that would break even enhanced bones).

Barnes’ hand slips off and he looks comically surprised, though he still twists his body (Tony doesn’t have anymore cat metaphors to use. He’s actually pretty certain Barnes is a feline now) to land cleanly on his feet. Tony huffs out a laugh, internally cheering at his escape, and then realizes he has sped up by a lot (oh shit, no air friction. No resistance. Oh fuck, his flight path). Quickly, he releases his hold on the armors form, allowing it to return to normal (he was going to try that again in much better conditions). Still, he’s a few more feet ahead of Barnes now and he can see his goal looming up close.

Tony banks to go back to the jail, taking advantage of his extra seconds to be EXTRA convincing. On the HUD, he can see Steve is beginning to get close to Tony’s team’s weapon stash. Barnes whips out another gun (a pistol? How many secret guns did this man have? Where did he even hide it?) and fires a massive paintball round at Tony. He dodges, but the damn thing knocks over a tree that cuts Tony off from heading back to the jail (jesus christ superstar).

Twisting midair, body bending so his feet could almost touch his head, Tony hears a weird noise from Barnes (a whine? A genuine whine? Nope). He checks off showing excess flexibility in front of Barnes on his “never repeat” list (it’s a long list).

He whips around into the building he’s been aiming for since the start. To his extreme satisfaction, Barnes doesn’t show an ounce of hesitation in following him in (in fact, he seems a bit more eager than before…?). He even makes it a few meters before noticing the sickening lurching of the entire interior, the fucked up patterns, the absolute visual absurdity of it all. He wretches and the door behind him locks.

Tony goes stealth, refusing to give Barnes a visual anchor. However, he wasn’t the Winter Soldier
for nothing – he keeps heading towards where Tony was irregardless, clever bastard. He starts stumbling pretty quickly, then squeezes his eyes shut to navigate blind. Unfortunately for him, things were ACTUALLY moving. It wasn’t just an effect.

Going as fast as he possibly could, Tony swipes Barnes’ legs out from under him. Barnes struggles, kicking him exceptionally hard in the ribs (he FELT that through the armour), but Tony ties his legs. Then he binds his wrist to the rest of his body, artfully looping everything into a full body bind that didn’t allow Barnes the slightest bit of wriggle room. The ropes criss-crossing his shoulders bulged with strain as Tony pulls everything tight - just tight enough to bruise without cutting off circulation (snug as a bug in a rug). He pats Barnes’ muscular thigh and feels the man’s entire body relax as he makes a little high-pitch noise of interest.

Tony slings him onto his back and takes off without addressing it. He goes as fast as he can with a human passenger, enhanced or not. He closely monitors Barnes’ accelerated heart rate to make sure the guy is still getting the kind of blood flow he needs. He uh, he tries not to monitor it too closely, though (Barnes DEFINITELY wasn’t just aiming for a sorry or thank you. The more you know).

Swooping high, high enough to be spotted from anywhere, Tony lets out a villainous laugh (Iron Man, enemy of love and romance! Tremble before him, oh magical girls! Man, he really needed to get Peter to lay off those shows).

“Captain America!”

He calls out over the highjacked coms. He sees Steve flinch, less than a kilometer from the weapons, damn it (though he spots Hope in her giant form VERY close to their jail. Natasha fighting to move her closer along with Jess).

”Guess who is finally going to jail!?"

Petty satisfaction rushes through him (man, this scenario felt good. If only Steve could go to prison, too). Barnes starts laughing on his back. Genuine full-throated laughter, the kind that has tears streaming down cheeks and entire bodies shaking with it (which Barnes was doing. If he wasn’t magnetically anchored, Tony would’ve dropped him).

”Save me, Prince Steven!”

He wheezes between laughs. Tony is grateful he turned off Barnes’ com link - he wouldn’t want Steve being all chill about rescuing his very not-in-distress pal (Barnes had an alright laugh for a ball of murder and betrayal).

As predicted, Steve immediately changes course towards Tony’s team’s jail. Tony tracks Peter as he slips away into the Avengers territory (good, he was the best suited to a quick rescue, though Matt would probably give him a few problems).

Extremis kicks into overdrive as Tony turns his bee bots into a spare boot for RiRi. He sends it her way in a rush, circling the jail and readying himself to throw down with Steve.

The second the fighting starts, something becomes clear: they are both hampered by Barnes (giggling and trussed up on Tony’s back). He needs help. RiRi quickly joins the fray, though Donny doesn’t. When Tony checks, he sees his boy is pretending to be out of commission and inching his ice UNDERGROUND towards the Avengers jail. He must’ve been working on it for awhile, clever bastard.
Vision is nowhere to be seen - rescuing Luke maybe? Tony will have to be careful about him.

RiRi keeps going for the shield when Steve tosses it (like a dog with a bone…or a Frisbee). Despite that, Tony still can’t get any closer to the jail without resorting to ‘deadly’ measures. He’s beginning to consider them when Peter bursts out of the trees on a massive ice block, Kamala and laser canon in hand. Tony throws Barnes at Steve, who catches him with a surprised grunt (Barnes has finally stopped with the giggling).

RiRi swipes Steve’s shield, Tony flicks Extremis onto max capacity, seizing the remaining bee bots to form metal for Donny’s ice to cling to. It creates a massive ultra-fast slide (he was so happy he encountered the no friction issue earlier – best plan ever) that RiRi throws the shield on. Peter leaps onto it, vibranium reducing the frictional force even further and letting them travel at Mach 1 right into Tony’s team’s weapons cache.

They’ve won.

They’ve won!!!!!!!
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

To everyone who entrusted me with their happiness, I have one thing to say.
You fools. You foolish fools.
(TW for a panic attack and some really angry coping with said panic)

Chapter Notes

This is probably gonna be the last update till Monday since I will be using garbage internet for the weekend :((((

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The aftermath of the little game was strange. Tony was almost in an afterglow headspace (where he was too tired to have bad thoughts and too happy to have bad emotions). For one golden moment, he had felt like the team was whole again. He had felt like he and Steve were back to back at last–the Avengers team mom and dad. That he was going to praise Tony’s kids or laugh or sling his arm around Tony’s shoulders and they’d be something good again.

They wouldn’t be good again, though. Of course they wouldn’t be. Bruce had called it years ago–they were a ticking time bomb. They would always, always, go off. And when they did…

Well, this is what always happened when Tony let himself get caught up in (the future, in flights of fancy, or putting all of his love into something and flying like he expected people to fly with him. Pepper hadn’t wanted a suit, Rhodey’s had broken his back, how long would it take RiRi to-) the Avengers.

Before his kids could even sprint to him, before Rhodey could walk because the bracers still didn’t like running (no matter how much support, shock absorption, and structure he gave them), before Natasha could share that secretive little smile with him again, Steve whirled around with anger and…fear (fucking hell, fucking HELL, Tony just went up and knocked on the gates of Hell because he didn’t know how to stop even when he had somebody around specifically to TEACH HIM how to stop) in his eyes.

“What were you thinking?”

He roars, ruddy-faced and ready to go (a thousand similar times play back in Tony’s memory like they are on a crappy film reel Tony just wishes would catch fire already),

“Fighting with him like that was reckless! Throwing him was reckless! I know you set this up to show the Avengers up and I know that you don’t care about Bucky’s safety, but for gods sake he’s sorry! I’m sorry, Tony! Why can’t you just–”
The film reel in Tony’s brain stutters and catches on fire, eating away at the film until there was nothing left but ash. Yeah, he’d intended to beat them into the ground. But—his kids. His kids were learning. The Avengers were learning. They’d done well. He had wanted…

The word ‘arrogant’ filters through the static in his thoughts.

Oh.

He was having a panic attack. He had kind of assumed that Extremis would always help him stave them off. Guess he had gotten ahead of himself again (arrogance would be the end of him. He knew that for sure).

There’s arguing, however it all slips away from him (sand through an hourglass). He can’t grasp its meaning. His entire field of vision has tunnelled down to Steve’s angry face far too close to his own (only there’s something odd about it. It’s not quite right. It’s not quite angry? Is it? Is it? IsssssssZZzzzz-).

Suddenly, Steve’s face is bleeding (nose crushed, blue eyes watering). Tony doesn’t understand. Extremis hisses like steam from a blown gasket and tries to pull him out of the quicksand his mind has become (dragging him down down down-n-n-nnnnn----), but it only makes it feel like Tony is being stretched (salt-water taffy of the coast of Catalonia, his mother speaking softly in Catalan, whispering to him about how Carbonell women aren’t made out of iron but are carved from soft stone by the salt of the sea. "The Earth birthed us, but the moon shapes us. The salt makes our sharp edges smooth, but never dull." She tells him in a banned language and he--).

________

Bucky swings viciously at Steve’s face. The adrenaline from the battle is still flowing through his veins, heightened massively after his capture (after ropes had pulled tight around him, snug and biting without breaking skin). He just...fuck, he had just responded (eager to please).

He almost apologizes. Some part of him recoils at the blood running down Steve’s nose. But he’s punched Steve in the face before (for pulling on Becca’s pigtails, for saying something sharp and jealous about one of his dates, and throwing out a photo of his father behind Mama Rogers’ back in a fit of grief) for far less than this. And he wants to do it again. Again and again until Steve understood not to touch what was his.

His whole body trembles with the strain of stopping with just one punch (his empty shoulder aches. He wants the arm back. He wants to channel the pain it causes, the pain that remains even now, into something better. Something good). His teeth are bared and his eyes are wild with restrained violence.

"Bu-"

“Don’t!”

He snaps, stepping around Steve with singular purpose, stepping past the spider kid clinging to Tony’s arm. They both reach for him, trying to drag him to a stop, but nothing will stop him right now. Nothing should stop him, not if they wanted him to stop wanting this so dangerously. He
pauses just within Tony’s personal space, the warmth of him raising the hairs on Bucky’s arm with proximity.

Fuck, it was so **good.**

Bucky inhales deeply and reaches out to cradle Tony’s face in his bloodstained fingers,

“He was just doing his job, you ass.”

He directs at Steve,

"Look at what you did.”

Tony’s pupils are pinpricks in a sea of electric blue. He’s not tracking Bucky at all, though he’s still standing, still breathing normally. It’s like he’s gone offline, despite the way his cheek pushes heavily (**willingly**) into Bucky’s palm (**making the tingling under his skin even worse, sparking up his arm and the back of his neck**). The spider kid is saying something, but his distressed words are irrelevant to Bucky. Everything is irrelevant outside of what he’s currently doing - leaning in just a bit, resting his forehead against Tony’s, drawing a bracing breath (**turn the safety on, Barnes. Don’t squeeze the trigger. Safety on, safety on, you’re surrounded by something **good** so don’t fucking break it**).

Somebody tries to move him, however Bucky might as well be carved from stone (**he’s not going anywhere**). He breathes deep again before trailing his fingers into those dense curls (**tugging just the barest inch, feeling the strangest urge to bare Tony’s throat to him, to make him feel like something dangerous is close by**) and pulling away, letting his hand drop to his side (**still blazing with the heat he had felt just seconds ago, burning underneath his skin. “I see a black hole that’s noticed the brightest thing in the room.” Playing over and over in his head like goddamned gospel**).

"I need to go.”

He croaks, looking around at the frightened faces (**Steve covered in blood, Colonel Rhodes finally reaching them with fearful hatred drawing every muscle tight, Spiderman half-reaching in to snatch Bucky's hand away**).

“I need to go and you’re not coming with me.”

He directs at Steve (**his best and oldest friend whom Bucky would rather not reduce to mincemeat**) before fleeing the field completely.

He wants to stay. He wants to draw Tony’s attention back to himself. He **wants-**

Bucky passes Wanda on his way to his room. He doesn’t know why she’s there. He doesn’t know when she left in the first place. He hisses a death threat under his breath and her head jerks towards him, eyes wide and scared, before he skitters off back to his room (**safety on, safety on**).
Rhodey kneels in front of his best friend, bracers be damned. He wasn’t going to loom over him right now, not like a certain piece of shit who just ruined the best thing that had happened to Rhodey in years (Tony had smiled like he used to smile before the company crushed him with responsibility and apathy and brown-nosers. Tony had smiled and shared his view with Rhodey, something he hadn’t even done when he first became Iron Man, when Rhodey had flown as War Machine at his side. Tony had finally opened back up with all his love and somebody had stepped on that. Rhodey wasn’t a murderer, but damn did he ever wish he could be. He was jealous of Barnes for being able to display all that murderous rage, for fucks sake).

"Tones,"

He murmurs, gripping onto both of Tony’s hands,

“Tones, I’m here. I’m here and it’s over.”

He squeezes those hands rhythmically,

“Your Roadrunner is here. It’s 2018 and I’m by your side. Friday is worried about you, Vision doesn’t know what to do, and all your kiddies want to see you smile. You gonna be able to smile, Tones?”

He aims for half-joking, the only tone Tony could ever take when he was on the defense (and when he came out of this, Tony was going to be further on the defense than he had been since the Mandarin. He was probably gonna be vicious if Rhodey didn’t manage to get him out of sight quickly enough, and he’d never forgive himself for it).

"C’mon, you pipsqueak. I can hear a robot crying somewhere. It’s beeping for you, for the one true robo-dad to come play fetch with it. Why’re you ignoring the beeps, Tones? C’mon.”

Tony doesn’t even blink. His eyes are glowing brighter though and somehow Rhodey doesn’t think it’s a good thing (looks like he wasn’t gonna get out of this without angry Tony).

Rhodey presses a hand flat to Tony’s chest, knocking it against the pool of light he can see through the undersuit. He drums his fingers when it ripples, trying to replicate the splash Tony and Pepper were so enamored with.

"What is dark within me..."

He whispers, drumming down again. Tony’s breath hitches.

“What is dark within me...”

He tries again, and this time Tony looks at him. His gaze is still unfocused. Rhodey drums again, repeating his mantra (please, Tones. Please come back. Please-).

"Illuminate.”

Tony says, blinking hard, then blinking hard again. His shoulders draw tight even as his face goes slack, and Rhodey knows what’s coming. He’s seen many Stark explosions over the years. He places his hand over Tony’s mouth as gently as possible, knowing it will be read as an insult but not having a better option (he had to delay this even if it made it worse for himself later).
“Get out.”

He hisses, not looking back in their audience. Nobody moves, so he bodily turns, hands clasped tightly over Tony’s furiously working jaw,

“GET OUT!!!!!!”

They don’t leave fast enough. Of course they don’t, fuck, they never do. Tony’s gaze is poisonous as he looks over at Rogers (at least his vitriol was targeted...for now. It probably wouldn’t be soon) and he bites Rhodey’s hand until he lets go.

“I never needed you to be a hero.”

He spits, aiming below the belt, swinging to hurt,

“I never needed you to be the best I could be. You made me worse, Rogers. Everything you touch gets worse.”

Rhodey lifts his bitten hand, noticing how everyone’s steps had stuttered, how Rogers had looked back (Jesus, Rhodey didn’t want to empathize with the man, but he’d had this turned on him before too. It wasn’t pretty). Tony grabs it in a crushing grip before releasing it (the threat is clear - don’t touch him again).

”You think you can talk to me about being reckless? You think you can talk about arrogance? How does it feel being an Aryan wet dream, Rogers? How does all that privilege feel to the 'little guy' that steps on everyone around him, pretending he’s still a mouse?”

Tony laughs, bitter and cold, and Rhodey is helpless to stop it.

“I bet Howard is rolling in his grave. I bet he finally regrets all the time he wasted hunting for you.”

Rhodey knows what’s coming. Tony puts on a mock thoughtful expression,

“I mean, you basically killed him, in a way. You definitely tried to kill his memory. Just a drunk driver, right? It wasn’t Barnes, but it was YOU, Capsicle.”

Tony is moving forward, but Rhodey manages to stand and grab his shoulders. Everybody else finally clears out in a hurry, but Rogers and Carol stay behind (one too stupid to go and one too brave).

”Actually, I know Howard would still love you.”

Fucking hell, fucking hell!

“Tony-“

Rhodey begs, though he knows nothing will stop Tony now. Not now that he was digging into old wounds with filthy fingers.

”Because you abused his child, too. Two peas in a pod. Not everything special about you came from the bottle Rogers - that special little gift has been in you all along, hasn’t it?”
Steve, white-faced and white-knuckled, retreats. The door to the training room slams behind him, but not before Rhodey hears a choked sob.

Tony’s gaze fixes on Carol next.

"Go."

Rhodey says, ignoring the wetness in her gaze or the firm set of her shoulders. Carol was sturdy, but Tony wouldn’t want her to see this. He wouldn’t want Rhodey to either, however Rhodey already had (one too many benders, one too many ODs, Tony terrified and alone and ready to fight).

She goes and Tony looks at Rhodey. He’s still angry. He’s so angry (scared, lonely, beaten one too many times to ever truly be harmless again). But Rhodey hopes that this time can be different (a good therapist was on his side and Tony was older, had more to protect, and was a little more whole than before).

"Illuminate."

He whispers, smiling sadly at Tony as he reaches out to pat his face. It makes Tony’s mouth, half opened in a snarl, clicked closed.

"What is dark within me..."

Rhodey says, drumming the fingers of his off-hand against his own chest. Tony’s eyes water. He doesn’t answer, but Friday does. She turns all the lights onto their brightest setting, dying the room white (cleaning it of the specters of the past battle).

Tony sits down heavily.

“Fuck you.”

He whispers, then abruptly begins to cry.

“Fuck all of you, fuck off damn it-“

Rhodey wraps him up in a hug and prepares to weather the storm ("When shall we three meet again, in lighting thunder or in rain?" It was raining now and Rhodey thought ‘the three’ needed to be different this time. He loved Helen, but now he needed Pepper).

Steve’s room has never felt colder.

Steve...has only felt colder once.

He had wanted a fight, another fight, anything to keep that gaze fixed on him and not Bucky, to keep Bucky safe (was that really all it was? Was that really all it had ever been?).

He stares at the card in his hand. Bucky’s therapist hadn’t been shy in shoving a handful of them under his door every time Bucky had a session, but Steve had never called. Because...
He didn’t need it *(or rather, he couldn’t do it).*

Chapter End Notes

Anxiety attacks can often manifest in some really vicious shit. Vulnerability isn’t something most people take well, let alone people who have been abused or conditioned to believe that anger is the only acceptable response to weakness. Tony's response isn't all that unusual in men his age or in his position (victim of child abuse, victim of torture, frequent victim of mischaracterization).

Often people think that not showing care is the worst possible response to any kind of breakdown, but in cases like this you really should get gone. It's difficult to change a response this deeply engrained and, if you aren't careful, it can become an abusive cycle wherein attacks are tolerated in a misguided attempt to help.

Also as kinda a sidenote, but Steve's perspective isn't entirely wrong here. Tony's comment about jail is rather pointed and can easily be read as an attack. Steve has also been the most heavily stressed by what was, for all intents and purposes, a fun scenario for everyone but him. The shield is a touchy subject for him and he was under fire by RiRi for an extended period of time which uh...probably brought up some unpleasant memories. Couple that with the fact that Tony has been ignoring Steve for months only to finally pay attention to him with Bucky trussed up on his back, and you've got a recipe for DISASTER. A Steve Rogers disaster. One that has been long in the making...

PS. Inspo for Catalanian Maria comes from the fic "Guilt For Dreaming"!
PPS. There's now a snippet fic of Tony's visit to Catalonia with Maria at http://purgatoryandme.tumblr.com/post/173211896408/between-scenes-2
Chapter Summary

Everything tastes better with Pepper, hoes before bros, and everybody needs to stop leaving blood on themselves (y'all nasty).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony watched the security tapes of his breakdown. He watched the blood drain from Steve’s face again and again and again.

He watched Steve yelling at him, Tony’s face going blank, and then watched Steve’s hesitant call of, “Tony...?”

As concern melted away his anger. He watched Steve reach out to him.

And then he watched Bucky Barnes deck his best friend in the world right in the face (this wasn’t supposed to happen. This isn’t how the story goes). He broke his nose.

Tony watched Barnes hold back on a second blow by holding him close (this isn’t how the story goes). He watched Barnes breathe him in (this isn’t how the story goes) and relax.

He watched Barnes leave without Steve (weren’t they till the end of the line?).

He watched Rhodey do his best to bring him back and then he watched him try to hold him at bay.

Steve’s face going white. Rinse. Repeat.

”Boss?”

Friday calls out hesitantly. He watches everything again.

“Boss!”

She tries again. He keeps watching until Friday stops the tapes.

”I’ll delete the footage.”

She threatens.

“I’ll get it back.”

He tells her.

”She can erase it permanently, as can I.”
Vision says, phasing right through the door and Tony’s illusion of privacy. He knows Friday has kept everyone updated on his...condition. He wasn’t truly being left alone (not like Steve, standing there like a prisoner before his executioner).

“Why would you do that?”

Tony asks, anger beginning to taint his words,

“Don’t you all enjoy watching me destroy a fairytale? Isn’t that what we all wanted? Steve is pretty crushed right now, just like he’s supposed to be.”

Vision looks immensely sad.

“Mr Barnes has his own problems, as do many of us.”

He closes his eyes,

“He threatened Wanda on his way to his room. She tried to tell me but I refused to listen. I don’t really know what to do with myself now that she’s back.”

Vision sits heavily on Tony’s bed (uninvited). Friday pipes up,

“You...loved her once.”

Vision keeps his eyes closed, making himself comfortable even as Tony elbows him viciously in the ribs,

“I did. I don’t now, but the echoes of that love still exist. Not seeing her makes me lonely, however seeing her makes me...”

He pauses, unsure how to even finish the sentence. Tony doesn’t have an answer for him (whatever had once almost been between him and Steve had crumbled into so much dust. Tony’s feelings about it, about anything related to it, had done the same). Neither does Friday.

”Mr Barnes responded to your distress.”

Vision says after the silence grows too thick, throwing a leg over Tony’s (he promptly kicks it off),

“And he also used you to ground himself. If you caused his action, you also caused his inaction.”

Vision throws his legs over Tony’s again. When Tony goes to kick him, Friday sends him a rude mental jab (her code brushing against his in a way he couldn’t, wouldn’t, abide by right now. Nobody needed to feel the mess in his head).

”Essentially, if you owed him a debt, you’ve already paid it.”

Vision says, like it’s really that easy. Steve had ruined Tony’s life, sure, but did that really excuse Tony doing the same thing back? Did that really set them to zero?

Tony had thought the game would let them take care of old wounds in a way that wasn’t threatening. It had been his idea. It was his fault (why couldn’t he just-).
“Mr Parker would be offended if he knew what you were thinking.”

Friday pipes up. She sounds offended for Peter.

“What?” Tony says, wondering for a petrifying moment if Friday had read his mind from a simple touch.

“This game was his idea.”

She continues, blissfully unaware of his whirling thoughts (was he really just that easy to read? Did he not have any privacy left?),

“You brought it to life, however it was his plan from the start.”

Tony feels like something is crawling from his stomach to his throat with the sole intention of strangling him. There’s the slightest idea there - that this isn’t his fault. He can’t let it take over. He can’t let himself be so blind (arrogant) again.

He kicks Vision’s legs off and heads out to Jess’ room. Nobody follows him, though he feels the saddest little ping of Vision against Extremis, and somehow that’s worse.

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When Jess opens the door she smells like alcohol and looks like death. There are no bruises on her, but she’s covered in dirt from being thrown around. Those smudges might as well be battle-damage – Jess still felt pain from powerful impacts (he caused those marks. He caused all of this).

Tony reaches for the bottle at her bedside and she swats his hand away. He reaches again and she smashes the entire bottle on the floor, staring him dead in the eye.

“That was the last of the whiskey.”

She breaks eye contact to bemoan the loss of the booze soaking into her carpet. There’s a bad little second where Tony considers just scooping it up with his hands (pouring it into his mouth, welcoming the burn of forgetting). Instead, he fists his hands in her shirt.

“If I’m angry,”

He says, halting and hating himself for it,

“Can you listen to it?”

Jess eyes him.

“If I hate myself and make it sound like I hate you, can you deal with that? If-“

Tony’s voice is muffled as Jess tugs him into a hug.

“No.”

She says honestly. She’s the strongest person Tony knows, but even she can’t deal with the way he
deals (because he’s awful. He’s always been something terrible and-).

"I can kick your ass."

Jess says, awkward as can be,

“We can fight. Just no...no mind games, Tony.”

He presses his face to her sternum and holds back the scream growing inside him.

“We can...talk...”

Jess is the one whose words are halting now (Jessica Jones? Suggesting talking? The world must be ending, or maybe Tony was just that f*cked up),

“About the things we hate. About all that dark shit where our hearts and livers should be.”

She hesitates, then brushes a hand through Tony’s hair where Steve’s blood has coagulated. She pulls it out with a grimace.

“We can talk about how much we hate everything but each other.”

It’s terrible that he needs this. But Tony does need this. There’s blackness running through his heart that Extremis can’t purge and he doesn’t...

Talking to his therapist will make him feel like this wasn’t his fault. He doesn’t want that (he can’t afford to look away from his mistakes anymore). Tony nods quickly, dragging Jess into the shower with him (a blast of water to the face would put Tony in the right mindset for this conversation - a bad one. Hopefully it would also get rid of the blood). They meet each other’s eyes as he turns it onto the hottest setting.

"I was happy, genuinely happy, for one second when I heard my father died.”

Rhodey finds them soaking Jess’ bed. Despite their enhancements, it’s obvious they’ve been crying (the slight discolouration and swelling around their eyes less revealing than the tear tracts dried on their cheeks). The floor reeks of booze and Rhodey doesn’t...he doesn’t know what to think of that.

His bracers whine angrily (for the tenth time that day) and he wishes he could sit down (and never stand again...or was that in poor taste?). He’s wandered this whole damn compound looking for his piece of shit little brother. He’s angry, though now isn’t the time for that.

Rhodey groans and stretches, trying to get some strength back into his limbs, as he calls Luke. Luke sounds like he’s been crying, too - he always took Jess’ rejections with stoicism, but emotions were running high tonight (he didn’t like seeing her drink. Not when she tried so hard for his recovery).

Luke comes and scoops Jess out of the drenched bed. He sighs, pressing his face into her hair (it reminds Rhodey of Barnes in the same way a funhouse mirror reminded him of his own reflection. It was warped, but it was the same thing. Bad thoughts).

“She was so happy.”
He whispered, sounding heartbroken,

“She was willing to work with the Widow. They worked well together. I haven’t...”

Luke refuses to cry in front of Rhodey, but he comes damn close,

“I haven’t seen Jess smile like that since I poured all my liquor down the drain. Before that, I’ve only seen her that happy in photos.”

Rhodey feels...

God he feels a lot.

He’s almost jealous of Luke, that this is the worst he’s seen (Afghanistan is a permanent specter in Rhodesys mind. His army issue counsellor had told him to stop looking so many times. That Tony was dead-). He wants to say something cutting, however he’s better than that. Luke is a better man than that, too.

”I’m sorry.”

Is all he can manage. It’s lame and not nearly enough, but Luke nods anyway. He leaves with Jess as Rhodey struggles to put several towels underneath Tony’s sleeping form (fucking bracers cutting his range of motion in half, Tony’s shitty sprawling body getting all over the fucking place, water everywhere, god damn-).

”You know...”

He says into the darkness,

“Loving you ain’t easy, Tones.”

He had called Pepper ages ago, but flights were long and she wouldn’t be here for another hour. Happy was going to drive her from the airport.

“But it’s the easiest damn decision I ever made. I chose to love you, you brat.”

Rhodey knows his voice is shaking, but Friday will never tell (she kept all their secrets close to her chest, trustworthy as her predecessor and half as likely to meddle),

“I saw you at rock bottom, where that piece of shit persona you use wasn’t even a persona anymore. It was you. Angry at the world and ready to take it down with you. I saw that and I CHOSE to love you, because back when you were five foot two and reeking of child abuse, you took one look at my notes from aeronautics and you called me brilliant like nothing made you happier than being shown up.”

(Rhodey knows he’d been beaten for that at some point. There was no way Howard would let ‘incompetence’ go unpunished)

“Because you saw one of the first, the finest, black aeronautics engineers in MIT and agreed that he could do a double major and a doctorate even though every other asshole thought it was waste of paper. Because you wouldn’t write a scholarship application for me because you thought you couldn’t do me justice. Fuck, Tony, I chose to love you the first time you built something stupid in
our kitchen and talked to it like it was a baby.”

Rhodey is crying, but his mother never raised him to be ashamed of it. She never raised him to be ashamed of a damn thing that he felt (the first time him and Tony had kissed, the first time he wanted to feel something from it, seeing that same wish reflected in Tony’s eyes, she’d understood. Nobody at her damn church would’ve supported her, but she told him she was happy that if he tried with anyone he tried with Tony. They hadn’t fallen in love, despite how much easier than would’ve been to understand than this, and she’d been damn alright with that, too).

“Loving you was natural, you dipshit. And when it wasn’t, I chose to. When you lied to me about dying, Tony? I chose to keep loving you. When you kept the shit this team was pulling a secret from me, the nightmares, the PTSD? I chose to keep loving you then, too. I don’t regret it. I’ll never regret it, because I know you’ve never regretted loving me, too. You loved me even when I nearly left you, Tones. You expected me to go, but you loved me anyway.”

Tony’s breathing has changed. Rhodey knows he’s awake. But this is easier. This lets Tony pretend (back when he was on breathing tubes, OD’d a few days after his parents funerals, the day they put Jarvis in the ground for good, Rhodey had talked to him like this. He’d talked to him like this for hours, letting Tony pretend he was dead instead of listening to somebody tell him he’d be missed).

”If you believe I’m a good man, and you’d be damn right to believe that, then believe this: I chose you.”

(’Believe you’re a good man’ is what he wants to say, but can’t because Tony only operates on ten levels of abstraction when he’s hurt. ’Believe other people can choose you too’ is another thing. ’Believe in something other than punishment as redemption’ is another)

Tony exhales a sob and Rhodey climbs into the bed, kicking off the bracers angrily (always getting in the fucking way). He wishes he could carry Tony away. He wishes he could take him to his mama’s house. He wishes she were still alive. He wishes he could call his sister and she could take Tony to the petting zoo or some other dumb bullshit that always used to be on her mind (“Look, Tones!” Used to be her favourite words, followed by whatever stupid thing they were there for that day) but they have responsibilities and he doesn’t have working legs and they can’t just go anymore-

”Pepper will be here soon.”

He whispers, then quoting Tony (because it was the truth),

“Everything is always better when Pepper is here.”

________

“Suits, Pepper.”

Is the first thing Rhodey says when Pepper enters the room. She looks confused and exhausted and everything in Rhodey’s body hurts, but he presses on.

“We’re going flying.”

(dragging her all the way here is worth it for the glimmer of hope that makes it past her exhaustion)
Friday helps them suit up. Tony is all blank faced confusion and quiet protests. He doesn’t seem to understand that they want to fly with him - he’s worried that Rhodey is scared and Pepper is even more terrified (it blows Rhodey’s mind. He’s wanted to fly since that game started. Pepper had wanted to fly since she first piloted Iron Man. She just didn’t ask for a suit, didn’t need one. She only ever wanted to fly with Tony).

They bundle him into an old armour instead of Bleeding Edge. Nobody wants him piloting with his brain right now - Friday was going to keep them all steady. And if she needed ground support, Rhodey knew Vision would be right there (he’d take Vision up too, but he hadn’t had the years Pepper and Rhodey did with Tony. He barely remembered the parts of him that were Jarvis).

Take off is slow and unsure. Piloting three people is new for Friday, even though she’s flown several different suits. She gets the hang of it quickly and begins to plot them a course out over empty farmland. It’s night and they can’t see shit on the ground, but all of them can see the stars (sprawling and endless, untouched by everything that had scarred the Earth).

Pepper slowly starts getting excited. She’s nervous, but there’s a light in her eyes that spells discovery (Pepper hardly ever met a challenge she didn’t want to take. She knew her limits, but they were few and far between). She asks Friday to let her do a loop, then laughs joyously when she executes it (adding in a little extra flair with a shower of sparks from her boots).

Rhodey is sweating heavily, shoving away flashbacks the whole time and reading the updated specs of War Machine. Helen had clearly done some upgrades and he feels...safer. Not safe, but safer (he’d probably never feel perfectly safe again. Maybe that was for the best – caution had always been a friend when he piloted planes).

Tony is silent, coasting on his back and watching the stars between the two of them. Looking at Tony, thinking of how he feels in the sky, and then thinking of how it felt to fly beside him, Rhodey chokes down the fear (the first thing Tony had ever piloted alone was Mark 1 in the desert. If he could do that, Rhodey could do this). The stars are beautiful and so is Pepper, weaving in patterns copying the constellations.

"Tony,"

She cries out,

“This is wonderful! I understand how you two feel now.”

She skims a gauntlet of the Rescue armour (‘Rescue.” Tony had affectionately called it, curling his fingers around the elbow of the rose gold and copper-plated suit. “Built to arrive on time.”) over the night sky.

“I feel like I can go anywhere in the world. I feel...”

She flips to coast directly over Tony’s armour, blocking his view of the sky.

“I love this. I feel like I’m everything I was ever meant to be up here, like there’s nothing stopping me up here, no borders, no people, no corporate job-“

Tony’s voice is husky as he says,

“Nobody can catch you. Nobody can hold you down. It’s just you and-“
Rhodey smiles (he remembered this conversation. When Rhodey had first flown, free of coercion or his best friend dying, it had been to the Florida Keys with Tony jabbering in his ear the entire time about flight. They rarely ever agreed completely on anything, but they agreed on this. Flight was never lonely, because it was you and-),

“The whole world in your heart. You’re free.”

Rhodey and Pepper chat, Friday still manning War Machine on a perfect steady path. (Rhodey can’t...he can’t do anything else right now). It feels good to have a real long conversation with Pepper for the first time in ages (to have Tony safely tucked between them where he belongs).

Two hours in they’re over open water. The yawning blackness of it spurs Rhodey into action (a reminder of Tony’s blank expression, where he had seen it before, a tub of water making his friend retreat inside of himself). He decides to take the next step.

“Let me show you the footage from your little simulation, Pepper - don’t you dare think I didn’t spot your influence in it.”

Tony’s breath catches and Rhodey sees his eyes squeeze shut miserably on the HUD (Tony hasn’t looked this small in years. Always trying to be larger than life, even when he was a scrap of a child). He doesn’t let it stop him - he plays back most of the sim for Pepper, all from Tony’s perspective. Friday cuts the more boring parts to keep it manageable, but he makes sure she keeps every fucking smile on every person’s face (he even keeps the awkward parts with Barnes, even though it makes his blood boil).

Pepper knows what happened in the end (their phone call had been short, however Pepper was always quick on the uptake). She has never seen this, though. She’s laughing, she’s cheering, she’s oohing and aahing. She asks him to pause on Donny’s laughing face as he makes it snow, on Kamala’s delight as she rolls towards Tony (like a newborn deer – had that girl ever even used those skates before?), on Matt’s gigantic grin as he chases Tony away (shaking a stick, shouting “Get off my lawn”). She also pauses on Barnes startled delight at Tony’s Johnson line, on Sam yelling from the bog trap while trying not to smile, on Barnes again, captured and laughing on Tony’s back (looking young again for the first time in a century).

"I’m glad,”

She says,

“That they all had a good time. I’m happy I helped build this.”

Tony doesn’t say a word and they slowly circle back to the compound. They all desuit, stumbling back to Tony’s room on exhausted limbs. Vision is guarding the door and he smiles (just a little too fast this time) at them.

"I’ll keep watch.”

Is all he says before they usher themselves inside.

None of them manage more than stripping their outer layers before they fall asleep.
Steve is laying awake in bed, face still bloody, when Bucky comes in. He’s tense and twitchy, wrapped in his gear like he’s about to go back into battle. But he begins to strip almost immediately after the door closes, digging through Steve’s drawers for spare clothes. Then, just as stiffly as he entered, he crawls into Steve’s bed.

“Your face is disgusting.”

He says, roughly dragging a damp washcloth over Steve’s nose. Steve scowls at him and shoves him off, but Bucky just keeps coming back (typical).

”You’re an asshole, but I think you know that.”

Bucky tells him, chucking the washcloth across the room without a care (probably splattering dried blood everywhere).

“I know you, Steve Rogers, and I know you’re scared that your whole world is gonna come crashing down again. And you know what Stevie? Maybe it will.”

Steves growls, shoving at Bucky again,

“Maybe you’ll wake up in another century again. Maybe I’ll die and there won’t be anybody left. But that doesn’t mean you’ve gotta lose everything, Steve.”

”What do you mean!?”

Steve yells,

“That is everything! That’s all I have!”

Bucky’s grin is razor thin and entirely false.

“No it’s not.”

He says,

“You’ve got yourself. Though you’re gonna lose that, too, if you don’t get some fucking help.”

”What do you kn-“

Steve cuts himself off, realizing too late the trap Bucky had laid for him.

“Yeah Stevie, I know exactly what it’s like to lose myself. But I’m not dragging my ass through the dirt like you. I’m picking up fragments to forge a new identity, while all you’ve gotta do is get creative with some glue.”

Bucky glares at Steve until he looks away (giving up). His hand roughly ruffles Steve’s hair (Bucky’s hands were still bigger than Steve’s. The serum hadn’t changed that. It hadn’t changed how safe that made him feel).

“Now shut the fuck up and go to sleep. You’ve got a therapy appointment in the morning, punk.”

Steve is too tired and sick of his own company to argue against that. He goes to sleep, Bucky by his
side, and tries not to hear Tony’s voice in his dreams.

He doesn’t succeed (‘‘Welcome to the 21st century, Cappachino! You’re gonna love it here!’’ He didn’t. He really didn’t).

Chapter End Notes

Lol ok this is prob the last chapter for the weekend. I'm using hotel wifi since I felt low key bad about leaving everybody screaming on that ugly ugly angst bomb.
Chapter Summary

Two grown men try to put themselves in time out, but pure stubborness isn't enough to stop the clock.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Somehow, Steve’s morning therapy appointment is more frightening than entering a battlefield without a plan. It’s terrifying in the way a collapsing building is (knowing that all the strength in the world still won’t let Steve keep it upright, won’t save the people inside, and that though he can sacrifice his life, it still won’t save all of theirs). He stands at the therapist’s (Bucky’s therapist, not his, not yet, not ever) door, utterly paralyzed, until the man himself opens it.

Though Steve had seen him before (at a distance, talking to Tony as if he wasn’t related in some way to the people Tony hated most in this entire building), he had written over his memories of Bucky’s therapist with ones more suitable to a…well, therapist.

He had imagined him to be a soft man. Perhaps, somewhere deep down, once he knew this man was supposed to work with HIM instead of just Bucky (somebody who had been through enough to need this), he had thought…

He had thought he would be a weak man. Somebody who would support Steve’s own weakness (once, back when he had first lost Bucky, he had gone to the medical tent to ask for something to help him sleep. His sadness had overwhelmed him, he zoned out at the sight of snow, and the medic had told him that mental weakness wasn’t acceptable. He’d been told that at basic training, too. Not only was his body weak, but there was a risk his mind would be too. He couldn’t break at what he saw. He couldn’t let it effect him, not if he was going to fight-).

Bucky’s therapist doesn’t look like a weak man. In fact, he doesn’t look like somebody who has ever been called weak in his life (not like Steve, small and scrawny and begging to get his face bashed in). He looks more like a symbol of war than Steve ever had (none of Steve’s scars ever stayed, the damage he took always melted away. It let him stand for peace – unblemished by the things he had done to achieve that peace. He was the ideal soldier for people in the modern century. Nobody knew Steve Rogers here).

However, despite the grizzled appearance of this man, he looked incredibly sad (the softness that Steve had expected was there, tucked into that sadness. It didn’t look weak, though. It just looked human). That look tugs at Steve’s heart, past his hesitancy, and he quickly takes a seat in the dim room (he doesn’t want to make that sadness more pronounced, that softness to become more exposed. This man had been hurt before. Steve didn’t want to be the reason he was hurt again).

"Steven Rogers."

Bucky’s therapist says,
“The man out of time.”

Steve winces (he hates that line. He hates everything about it. Everything it stands for).

"The world hasn’t left you behind, Steven.”

The man says. He peers at Steve with his one eye, sadness ever present (pity? Was it pity? Steve couldn’t deal with pity?). He then looks down, pulling a document out of his desk drawer. He unfolds it carefully, scarred and twisted fingers drumming over yellowed pages. He pushes it towards Steve.

It’s transcripts, photos, awards, written accounts…of everything Steve has ever done (not Captain America - none of these achievements belonged to him. There was an art award, a comic he’d done, his old school records, the caricatures Steve had drawn in Central Park in disguise, letters he had written for Bucky, a painting for Peggy...).

"The world hasn’t left you behind,”

Bucky’s therapist says again, drumming his three-fingered hand against his chest,

“But you’ve left something back in time, yes?”

Steve rubs his thumb over the painting of Peggy (her red lips tilted down in a frown a displeasure as she peered down the scope of a rifle. There was blood on the cuff of her wrist. Steve had admired her – Steve still admired her, loved her, even in death).

“The only thing I left behind was grief.”

He says, thinking of the way Peggy hadn’t recognized a thing when he’d visited her, the way Bucky hadn’t recognized him either, the way Tony looked at him like he was a stranger and-

Bucky’s therapist interrupts the spiral his thoughts were entering. His words are flat and heavy:

“Then let’s get your grief back for you. Let’s go back, Steven.”

Clutching a folder of things done years ago (and the barest hint of things done recently – what had he done worth a damn in this century?), things that don’t mean a damn thing anymore (though he wishes they did. He wishes for it every time he closes his eyes), Steve gives the barest nod.

He was just trying this out. He could do that. For Bucky...and for Tony.

Tony feels hungover when he wakes up. He knows he didn’t drink, knows Extremis wouldn’t let him have a hangover anyway, but the feeling is so strong he’s nearly convinced he fell off the wagon anyway. The fact that Pepper and Rhodey are half naked in his bed only fucks with his brain further (Pepper only had her bra half-removed. It was jammed over her shoulders, hanging around her neck in a way that was probably dangerous. Rhodey’s bracers were also on the ground in a pile, not even properly put away. Those things were death traps for anyone who stepped on them by accident).

Tony almost remembers flying last night, but he knows that couldn’t have happened (he doesn’t
deserve that. He hasn’t earned even the slightest hint of that kind of sacrifice from either of his friends. All he’s done recently is leave them in a lurch. He hasn’t done shit for the company and —

His phone rings, and he awkwardly smacks at it to avoid waking his friends. It fails to turn off, so he slips out of bed and grabs it. Without looking at the caller ID, he meanders over to the bathroom shower to answer (somewhere he can feasibly have some privacy if either of them woke up. He knows Pepper will have plenty to say to him if she’s here. She was supposed to be at a conference in China).

"Give me a quote, Tony."

His therapist says, not even bothering with a hello. He should’ve known better than to think he could avoid her (she was basically magic, the old witch. She could probably see into the future. Probably knew he was going to pull this the second anything in his life started going wrong).

He goes to say something (some excuse, some platitude, some deflection he already knows won’t work), but she isn’t done.

“Don’t tell me what’s on your mind. Give me a quote.”

She says. Insistence isn’t usually her thing, so he knows he’s even more fucked than he previously thought. She knows something.

She’ll know everything if he gives her a quote (she could read him like whatever book he’d pull it from). He knows it’ll give away all his secrets and he doesn’t want it to. But to give her a quote without saying anything else is a challenge, a puzzle for her to solve, and he can’t keep that from her (not after she’d given him so many, constantly keeping his mind engaged to dig through all the layers of bullshit he tucked every genuine emotion into).

"Oh dire, dreadful death, you drag your heels. Why dawdle and draw back? You drown my heart."

He says, pressing his face against the shower wall. He has a fuzzy recollection of letting all his toxic thoughts flow down the drain with Jess in the shower (which was probably a shit idea. It felt so right, though. That darkness festering inside of him felt like home). He keeps going,

“This misfortune you find is your own manufacture. Keep hold of what you have, it will harm no other, for hatred comes to the hand that chose it.”

Tony chooses hatred all too often. It comes to him like a beloved pet (or a beaten one). It seems to follow him wherever he goes (along with a list of names that grows ever longer. How many people had died because he tried to let go of his hatred, hmm?).

“The Death of King Arthur.”

She hums,

“Well, it could be worse. It’s the Armitage translation?”

Tony grunts.

"Armitage has an interesting quote that can describe you, Tony. Prose fills a space, like a liquid poured in from the top, but poetry occupies it, arrays itself in formation, sets up camp and refuses to
His brain is tired today (could emotions give him a hangover? Maybe standing in a shower for hours when he has a fear of water wasn’t the best plan). He doesn’t know what she wants. She pauses then says primly,

“All right, let’s try something less happy, hm? The awful daring of a moments surrender which an age of prudence can never retract, by this, and only this, we have existed.”

Tony slides down the wall and curls into himself on the shower floor (mind whirling like an industrial fan turned on for the first time in twenty years. It kept stuttering, but it was picking up speed),

“I took a chance, because that’s what I need to do to live. There was a space for me to fill, so I filled it, and then I made it a home. My home.”

He says (why did Tony even need to live, really? All he was doing was digging out spaces for himself. Every time his shovel struck Earth, he was hurting somebody. Wasn’t that why the Avengers hated him?).

“There’s the abstract thought I’ve come to expect. Try this on for size: I have heard the key, turn in the door once and once only, we think of the key each in his prison, thinking of the key each confirms a prison.”

Tony mulls it over (industrial fan picking up speed, sweeping out the dust and cobwebs, creating a windstorm).

“I looked for just one answer,”

He finally replies (a sense of doom somewhere on the horizon, hidden underneath the dust),

“And so I closed the door on any other answers. I decided what happened with the game was my fault alone. Fuck, but it IS.”

(He had known she’d try to make him see otherwise, but he still didn’t want to fight about it. He respected her, respected her opinion, but this…this kept happening. Tony kept happening)

She’s quiet for awhile.

“It seems you didn’t want to talk to me, Tony. May I ask why?”

It’s a little unexpected - she usually avoided asking him direct questions (just like she avoided insistence – she never pushed his heart out into the open), especially when he was this wound up. But honestly, he appreciates this more than her saying she already knows (and he knows she knows). He’s sick of being transparent right now. He wants his privacy.

“No.”

He says,

“You can’t.”
Saying it feels like some kind of petty victory until she hums softly in affirmation. She’s going to let him get away with this – with running away. He can’t believe it when she says,

“Alright. Can we talk about something else then?”

The question is so soft. Everybody was being so soft (Jess with her sad eyes and attempts to meet him in the middle, Pepper and Rhodey sleeping in his bed, Vision’s affection brushing against his mind with Friday cradling Extremis in her virtual hands-) and it made Tony feel so much sharper (jagged edges and shrapnel sinking into cardiac muscle).

“What?”

He asks sharply (all business, Tony Stark when he’s ready to fight a boardroom of old men who think they know better than him about his own damn company), and she easily tells him,

“Sure, if that’s what you want.”

It draws him up short. Nobody ever actually LETS Tony have anything. Nobody who wants anything, anyway. The sense that this isn’t over, that it can’t just be this easy, makes Tony practically trip over his own tongue.

“Why am I not getting better? Why can’t I just—just move on? Why can’t I just stop?”

Bursts out of him, like his heart has been ripped out of his chest and jammed into his mouth. It’s more honest than he ever intended to be.

”Stop what? Stop being yourself, Tony?”

She asks and he grinds his teeth, wishing he could cause some permanent damage Extremis wouldn’t steal from him (he wants the reminder that this is foolish. That opening himself up like this will get him hurt. That he needs to stop).

“Stopping implies no future. Nothing has ever been about the present with you, Tony. Why start now?”

She presses, curiosity shining through her voice (something Tony has always wanted to nurture before, but right now he wants to destroy it. What was there to be curious about here? He needed to stop).

”Because the people I hurt are in the present! The mistakes I made are in the present!”

He yells into the phone, trying to keep the volume just low enough that he won’t wake up his friends.

”Life isn’t painless - everything under the sun casts a shadow. Besides that, ‘made’ and ‘hurt’ are words for the past, Tony. Hurts will heal in the future, mistakes will be forgiven, and those that are not will be accepted.”

She tells him, so frankly that for a moment Tony can’t even think of an argument. His breathing is ragged into the phone. He can hear stirring in the bedroom. He can’t focus (her words spreading like poison through his internal litany of “stop stop stop”).
“Stopping is for the dead and the forgotten. Change though, change is for the future. And what does the future do, oh Futurist?”

She asks, calling upon the only name Tony had ever liked for himself. His voice cracks as he says,

“What do you want me to do?”

Because he honestly can’t think of an answer on his own. He’s so tired.

“Make me a damn fine cup of coffee. Fuck it up a few times. Learn from it. I didn’t like the first cup, does that mean I don’t like coffee?”

She responds. He knows what she means, but he can’t...he can’t regain the blunt directness from their last session. He can’t grasp that progress right now.

”I thought we were on desserts now?”

He laughs wryly. He can practically hear her frown over the line (great, he was fucking up her day, too).

“Sometimes we move forward and realize we skipped a step, teach somebody how to make the cake but not the cream.”

She says. It makes Tony’s heart stutter.

“You didn’t skip any steps with me.”

He whispers (she had done all she could. He was just too-).

“Didn’t I?”

She says sharply,

“Am I less trustworthy if I admit to a mistake, Anthony? Do my credentials mean less?”

”No-“

”Then why are you trying to take my mistake away from me? It is a learning opportunity and it is mine, so give it back.”

The force behind those words has Tony laughing quietly. The second he stops, he can hear Pepper’s soft voice calling him. His therapist hears it, too.

“Do you feel well enough to see your friends?”

She asks.

“Yes.”

He whispers. She doesn’t quite believe him, that much is clear, but she bids him goodbye and hangs up anyway (giving him the privacy he so desperately craved. Their conversation would continue
another day, though. He wasn’t escaping for good). The care she was exhibiting despite his garbage attitude makes Tony’s heart throb in his chest. He glances down at the circle of light Extremis produces and brushes over it with his fingers.

“You’re here because I believe in you.”

He says to it, tapping it and causing the light to ripple,

“Even when I don’t believe in myself, I still believe I have a heart, right? That’s why you’re here.”

Pepper calls him again and Tony heaves himself to his feet. He has to move forward. Maybe he doesn’t quite believe he has a heart, but she does. Rhodey does too, and he can’t betray them.

He’s got to keep going (he couldn’t stop).

Chapter End Notes

Tony: *gathering up a massive piles of mistakes and regrets*
Tony: Look at what a mess of a person I am! Look at all of these sins!!!!
Everybody in the MCU: *peering into the pile*
Everybody in the MCU: Are those ours? I think I see a test I failed in high school in there
Tony: A test you failed because I didn't donate enough money to the school system! I am a monster!
Everybody in the MCU: It has my name on it. I've been looking for it for ages. Give it back!
Tony: No! I need these for my self-flagellation!
Tony: *flees into the sunset while dropping errors all over the place*
Rhodey: *swooping in like death from above and violently smacking more of them out of his hands*
Rhodey: Stealing is wrong, damn it!
Spring

Chapter Summary

Tony romances some tech, Natasha and Bucky have a dance-off, and Tony provides Bucky with the perfect opportunity to get rekt.

Chapter Notes

Actual genuine author's note: So uh.................fighting in the comments isn't my favourite, y'all. Neither are rude comments. Try to keep it toned down in there, yeah? Remember that authors aren't getting paid, aren't writing exclusively for you, and that they can see what you write.

Tony fixed things. It’s what he does. It’s who he is - Harley had nailed it when he’d called Tony a mechanic. Inventing was one his grand loves, but the lover that held him at night and cradled him as he rested was fixing broken things (a romance for the ages, one that started when he was a child and Ana had cooked on a broken stove, compensating for the lopsided burners cheerfully. There was something soothing about adjusting the broken bits to make a perfect dish. Maybe Tony had known, even back then, that he would never be whole).

Tony kisses the toaster in the compound’s kitchen that had been burning everything on the edges (“it’s ok, baby. I know you were just trying your best. You just put in a little too much power, that’s all. If we tone it down right here, you see where your coils are all red hot and painful, if we tone it down here you’ll be alright. Even if no one else eats your toast, I will.”). He delicately runs his fingers over the washing machine, whispering soothing words as it works at only half capacity (“Aw, muffin. Who screwed with your rotors? Which pair of pants was it? I’ll fight em, I swear I will. You’re still beautiful, honey, I’ll get you back in working order in no time. ”). He lays a comforting hand on all the sports cars that people had been planning to junk (the fact that anyone assumed he bought his collection new just stood to show he’d done a damn fine job with them - they were all his strays, works of art that had been abused too many times to count).

Of all his tech, only War Machine receives a benediction (“Safe travels. Make your enemies tremble.”) whenever he passes through the shop, even though it no longer needs any fixes (Rhodey had flown, steely steadfastness by his side, and Pepper had corkscrewed and ducked and dove above him in burnished rose gold and copper matching her hair and freckles. Tony still had trouble believing that was real. He had trouble believing they would ever want to do it again). Tony used to give prayers or grand meanings to all his weapons, but he doesn’t do that anymore. Only War Machine remains (though Rescue has words carved inside of both gauntlets – “As a wheel turns smoothly, free from jars, my will and my desire were turned by love, the love that moves the sun and the other stars”).

Tony loves his machines, broken as they are. He fixes things. It’s what he does. It’s who he is.
He can’t fix himself (*won’t fix the humanity that clings stubbornly to his heart*), but he’ll be damned before he leaves something broken in his presence.

The West Compound has been consumed by an uneasy silence for several days now. It only grew thicker which each tick of the clock, suffocating everyone inside.

As much as the Avengers knew something wasn’t quite right with Bucky, he hadn’t ever resorted to violence against them. Anger, sure. Stubborn silences and lengthy escapes, yes. But he had never hurt them after being unfrozen in Wakanda - he had been absolutely terrified of it.

He didn’t seem terrified of it anymore, though.

Wanda was cooking stiffly in the kitchen (*avoiding the broken toaster that nobody had thought to replace*), pale and unhappy as Clint chopped vegetables. He’d been doing some deep thinking about why Wanda had been sent away (*training in an isolated environment to prevent fatalities, to remove distractions, to emphasize control*) and, past his guilt over her brother, he understood the necessity. He wasn’t angry about her being taken away anymore - Wanda was prone to lashing out in ways that could cause permanent damage (*the thought of Charlie Spencer skittered across his mind and he winced*).

Wanda was dangerous. But Clint always coddled dangerous things (*Natasha wasn’t his first or his last, though she was his best*) and it made his heart ache to see her this depressed. He was pissed to Hell and back about Barnes’ little display of aggression.

Clint runs a soothing hand down Wanda’s back. He can feel the magic sparking under her skin, but it’s STAYING down there. Barnes had no right to challenge her the second she got home (*to immediately test the control she was trying so hard to learn. Barnes should know better. He knew perfectly well how much it sucked to have his control prodded at*). Clint was going to talk to him about toning it the Hell down, whatever his issue was.

Sam was pacing the length of the common room behind them, far more agitated than Clint had ever seen him. He had the air of a man who had realized a grave error. Sam always internalized guilt, though usually he was good at communicating it and working it out. He was never bothered for long (*he had so many physical tells that Clint could track his mental state down to the second it changed. It made Sam easy to get along with. He didn’t keep many secrets*). Whatever was wrong (*Steve’s outburst came to mind. It was uncalled for and had swept away the fun of The Avengers game day like a semi-truck. It hit Clint in a way that felt eerily reminiscent to cognitive recalibration*) was clearly something Sam hadn’t managed to talk about yet.

Clint wanted to poke at it, he wanted to poke at Steve, and most of all he wanted to poke at Natasha. But Natasha had disappeared, just like Barnes.

Clint worried sometimes that she wasn’t going to come back. It wasn’t something he had ever had to be scared of before, not since she’d come in from the cold. He didn’t like it.

Sighing, he leaned over to try Wanda’s cooking (*wondering where his partner had gone, why she had left, and knowing that answer was attached to a red and black suit and short-cropped hair*).

The training facility was occupied, just like Tony had expected. A cacophony of noise was contained
within it - even with the soundproofing, Tony could feel the vibrations in the door (rolling through him like every concert he’d ever been swept up in, like a good engineering binge, like the motor of something powerful and perfect for off-road driving with Rhodey screaming at him from the passenger seat). If he closed his eyes and focused, he could run a program to tell him exactly what those vibrations were.

Heavy drums, a sudden fluting uptick of a woodwind, the slamming of feet into the floor over and over with enough force to break bones. And there - ostinato, the obstinate rhythm. Tony would recognize Stravinsky anywhere. A hymn flowing over a simple little ditty, everything displaced and disjointed. He’d learned to play this long ago (Maria’s hands sneakily carrying his over a whirlwind of notes, heart racing, fingers flying, elegance forgotten in a moment of pure excitement).

It was Danse Sacrale - the sacrificial dance.

Tony uses Extremis to silently open the training room doors and steps into a wall of sound that threatens to bowl him over. It pours over him, piped in from thousands of speakers meant to realistically replicate the sounds of various training simulations. He feels like he’s trapped in the depths of an orchestra pit - exactly how he thinks Rite of Spring should be experienced (chaotic and frantic and wonderful).

Natasha and Barnes are executing vicious choreography he’s never seen before, though they both seem to recognize it (their steps never hesitate). Following the white water rapids of the hymn (rushing and crashing in a way no hymn ever should), Barnes slams his bare feet into the ground, arching his spine and kicking one leg upwards vertically with enough force to kill. Natasha gnashes her teeth at him, snapping out a hand to draw her nails against Barnes’ throat. Her body curls into the much slower tune that was boxing in the rhythm Barnes was following. He jerks back, shoulders bowing, and Natasha leaps in manic (yet methodical...predatory) circle that just keeps getting tighter.

She’s closing in on him, forcing his back against the wall.

Tony leans back against the door, sitting and watching silently. The dance isn’t beautiful. It’s ugly and misshapen, practically spitting in the face of traditional ballet. It’s not really the dance Tony is staying for (though it is fascinating).

No, he wants to see this Barnes - the one that belonged to Natasha. The Barnes who had nothing to do with him. The door he had yet to open, the key he had yet to notice, the story he hadn’t considered (the one that didn’t lead to an unhappy ending of America’s favorite fairytale).

The pair’s vicious disconnected movements grew more fluid, though their powerful stomps and jumps were unceasing. Natasha’s hair was soaked, as was Barnes’. His chest and back were straining with effort as he lifted Natasha one-armed, who twisted cat like in his grip to go for his throat again.

This time when Barnes blocked, he jerked away in a series of increasingly erratic steps. His body twitched like he was gagging on blood, before he flew into a series of pirouettes, each one getting closer to a total loss of control (swaying like a drunk and reminding Tony of that first interaction, where Barnes had asked him if he was satisfied. Seeing him like this gave that moment new meaning. Tony tried not to dwell on it). Natasha spun and bowed erratically behind him, sweeping her hands through imaginary soil (summoning spring, asking if the sacrifice had been enough).

Finally, Barnes crashed into the ground, his extended arm jerking like a clock hand downwards until it lay flat.
He had ‘danced himself to death’, though Natasha had guided him there quite violently (*Tony had been beginning to wonder if the Red Room’s version of this ballet was more murder-y than usual. It was almost comforting to see the ending was unchanged*).

Barnes’ head slowly turned, his face angled perfectly to see Tony. His eyes were closed though, his face red and bared chest positively heaving with exertion.

Tony could flee without being seen. Natasha was finishing her dance and the music was still pounding. Barnes would be none the wiser. He could just go, curiosity sated, and never come back.

Instead, he sits up straight and waits.

Barnes’ eyes flutter open. Distantly, Tony is aware of Natasha crashing to the ground. However, he can’t look away from Barnes. His face slackens in surprise, shifting through a dozen emotions, before settling into expression he always took when Tony was looking at him (*satisfaction*). Barnes lays still, unmoving except for the unsteady rise and fall of his chest. His breathing began to even out as the music drew to an end, but the flush remained on his bare skin (*Tony didn’t think he’d ever seen a super soldier go scarlet with anything but anger. Steve had never seemed tired. It was oddly…vulnerable? Intimate? It seemed wrong for Tony to see this*).

Deliberately, Tony let his gaze follow the way the red stained Barnes’ neck (*where his pulse jumped*), made blotches of colour on his chest, and settled heavily on his stomach (*filling in the divots between his abdominal muscles, spreading below the edge of his tights*). Barnes’ steadying breathing accelerated again (*this was revenge. Never let it be said that Tony didn’t repay wrongs done against him. Barnes didn’t have Extremis to chase his blush away*).

Tony drew himself to his feet, slowly clapping while maintaining eye contact with Barnes.

“I’ve always enjoyed the Rite of Spring, though I’ve never seen it performed so...murder-y. Murderlicious?”

He pauses to gather his thoughts, noting Natasha jerk out of the corner of his eye (*it was a rare day he got the drop on two super assassins*).

“Usually it’s not so vicious.”

He says.

“The choreography had to be changed to suit two people.”

Natasha responded, not moving from her position on the floor. She was probably exhausted if Barnes’ state said anything (*she had split two nails somewhere along the line. Her bare feet were actually bruised along the soles*).

"I imagine,"

Tony says (*refusing to take even a second to steel himself for it, to talk himself out of what he’d decided*),

“That executing choreography would be easier without that mess in your shoulder stabbing at your neurons, hm?”
He’s looking right at Barnes, lifting his chin and squaring his shoulders.

The words are equal part challenge and invitation - he **wants** Barnes to fuck this up. Tony wants to give Barnes the chance to betray him. He wants Barnes to jump at the chance for some infamous Stark tech and to disappear the moment he gets it (**dick off back to Wakanda to be T’Challa’s problem once again**). He wants to fix something that’s broken in his home (**a hungry hunted expression, a certain desperation flavouring his every action, pain pain pain being a clear constant in the way he walks and talks and is**).

He wants Barnes to reveal his lust in whatever form it’s going to take so Tony can shred it at the root (**salt and burn the very earth it grows in**).

He wants to chop out whatever parts of Hydra’s arm he’d left festering in a half-feral excuse for a man.

He wants Barnes to be able to lift Natasha without straining horribly damaged tissue, for this deadly upsetting **thing** to do something human, for Barnes to be able to give Steve a fucking hug, or-

Tony wants a lot of things, but this isn’t just about what he wants. So it’s an invitation - he’s offering Barnes a chance to fix his shoulder. Maybe Shuri has been working on an arm or something. He wouldn’t put it past her, curious as she was about any and all biotech. The shoulder mooring would need to be un-fucked for that. Tony wouldn’t put on an arm, though – he’d removed the original for a reason.

No, he wasn’t giving Barnes another way to make a grab at his heart (**not that this one, this light, was tangible. Nobody could rip this one out of him**).

Barnes breathing stops completely. His fist clenches tight.

“Is this some kind of trick? Revenge?”

He asks, a fine tremor passing through his only arm.

“Is this?”

Tony shoots back, refusing to elaborate. Barnes is smart - Tony won’t have him pretending he isn’t (**whatever weird fucked up thing there is between them, only Barnes knows what it is**).

“No,”

Barnes says,

“It’s not.”

Tony taps his foot, impatient.

“So?”

He asks,

“What does a man need to do around here to fix a broke machine? You need to see my electrician’s license? My diploma? Some evidence of skill that isn’t already incredibly obvious? I fixed the
Barnes looks absurdly bewildered, still spread out half-naked on the ground in a puddle of his own sweat. Tony frowns at him and walks closer, kneeling next to Barnes’ head and ignoring the rigid tension that suddenly makes all of his muscles flex and twitch. Barnes was going to give him a clear answer and he was going to give it now.

Tony places a hand beside Barnes’ head, watching him track the movement with helpless fascination (*Extremis* makes his veins glow a faint blue while anxiety batters at his heart, like some tiny creature trying to convince a predator it’s poisonous).

“Well?”

He asks,

“Am I putting you back together or not, Humpty Dumpty?”

Barnes blinks, grounding himself (*an old and apologetic cat living with a mouse. Tony had to stop with the cat analogies*).

“Yes.”

Barnes breathes, then continues (*the word falling heavy on Tony’s ears, crawling up his spine one centimeter at a time*),

“Please.”

Barnes is unnerving, but Tony won’t let him stay like that. He’s going to dig out every single thing wrong with him, bit by bit, starting with his fucked up shoulder (*Barnes couldn’t do anything worse to him than what he had already done. Tony could dig into him, could touch him, without fear –“Don’t be afraid. My troubles are mine and I am the only man alive who can sustain them. My load of woe is incommunicable to all but me.” They wouldn’t share any sadnesses. Tony wouldn’t empathize with him*).

By the time Tony was done, the Bucky Barnes that killed his parents would be as good as dead. Natasha’s dancer, Steve’s friend, Sam’s frenemy...well, they would just have to see who survived (*“When there is nothing left to burn, you have to set yourself on fire”*). He didn’t get to decide that.

Even though it’s not his choice...

He hopes Natasha’s Bucky makes the cut. Tony has always appreciated the arts.

(*What was the old Greek maxim? Ah, yes. “No man should be considered fortunate until he is dead”*)

Chapter End Notes

*Tony @ Toaster:* I love you. No one shall ever tear us apart

*Tony @ Fridge:* I love you. No one shall ever tear us apart
**Tony @ Dial-Up Router from College:** I love you. No one shall-

**Rhodey:** Aren't you basically cheating on all of them with the rest? You're like some tech Casanova.

**Tony:** How dare?!?!?!?! In my house?!?!?! In front of my babies?!?!?!?!?!?!?!

Polyamory is REAL, Sweetpea

**Rhodey:** Your babies?

**Tony:** My babies

**Rhodey:** Your babies are also your lovers. Not only a Casanova, but incestuous too.

Oedipus Tech

**Tony:** You take that pun back, you son of a bitch!!!!

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A bunch of the quotes in this chapter are from Oedipus Rex. Why? Because I was thinking about Greek tragedies and remembered that Tony named one of his AIs after Jocasta, the queen who got banged by her son in Oedipus Rex. What a weird naming connection. Tony, why you do this????

(((I wonder if it's because of the themes of fate, free will, tragic error, and being blind as to what's right in front of your face...Tony's AIs help him predict the future and avoid tripping himself up. Still, why JOCASTA!?))))
Tony and Bucky lay on the floor long after Tony had gone. They both shivered in the chill that had overtaken their overheated bodies.

"What,"

Natasha said incredulously, rolling over to face Bucky,

"Was that? What is he thinking?"

Bucky kept his eyes closed, keeping the last image he had seen (strange determination filling Tony’s expression, something deadly and bright and interesting) fresh in his mind.

"I don’t know."

He tells her, honest as he can be. He thinks he does know, but his therapist has warned him about Tony Stark (about assuming he knows how he feels. About over-analyzing him or obsessing over him). But still...

Tony Stark was turning out to be the kind of man who undid whatever was done to him. Someone who rewrote the world with his own hand. And Bucky was, in a way, something that had been done to him.

Recognizing the creeping direction his thoughts were slanting towards (a weapon taken from the hands of a killer, remade in the hands of somebody better, turned around, safety off), Bucky pinched his nose and heaved himself unsteadily off the ground (muscles protesting loudly).

He extends a hand to Natasha, which she ignores, moving to stand on her own like her body isn’t in just as much pain as his.

"Call your therapist."

She says, eyebrows arched high.

"You’ll need to keep in close communication with him if you’re going to be anywhere near Tony."

Her gaze sharpens,

"If you aren’t careful,"

She says, approaching him and running a hand down his chest (filled with malice),
“And if you hurt him...”

Her hands grip his ballet tights (*her short nails shredding the fabric*),

“I’ll chop your balls off and feed them to Clint’s dog.”

Well, shit. That was some good incentive. Not that he needed it, but it was nice to know someone would watch over him (*he knew he wasn’t quite...right*).

Bucky nods and carefully pulls himself free from her hands

As he flees the room, he pulls out his phone to dial the oldest angriest man he knows. He’s probably going to get reamed out for this but...he’s excited (*was that a bad sign? He hoped not - he hasn't been this giddy since the 40s*).

__________

Vision, Tony, Rhodey, and Carol sip virgin mojitos and watch the stars. Helen and Pepper are on teleconference, excitedly talking to each other about Pepper's flight footage. It’s the most youthful thing Tony has ever seen either of them do (*Carol's face goes soft and warm as the two women giggle and discuss the perfect symmetry of peppers loops. Carol always wanted so much for other women. Tony wishes he could help her, give her the tools, but he doesn’t know the first thing about the shadows that Carol, Jess, Hope, and the others spend their time shining out of existence*).

"You sure about this, Tones?"

Rhodey asks him quietly, reaching over to the pitcher to refill his glass. His bracers are off again - they’ve been bothering him more often now that he’d taken War Machine out to fly (*a twinge of guilt kept poking at Tony, though Rhodey had yelled at him the last time he'd tried to slip away to work on new schematics*). Helen had been trying to figure out if the pain was biological or mental, but so far she hadn't come to any firm conclusions.

"The shoulder mooring is a wreck. You could see it when he punched Steve. He usually covers it in battle, but..."

Tony waves a hand at the bracers on the ground,

"Just because something works doesn’t mean it couldn’t be better. If it hurts somebody, it should be improved. It’s a machine that doesn’t work right."

Rhodey thoughtfully takes a sip of his drink (*Tony was this close to just snatching the bracers off the ground and sprinting down to the lab. If Extremis didn't make his eyes glow, he'd be working on them right now in his head*). Vision reclines further on the ground, resting his head heavily against Tony's arm. He never wanted a lawn chair, always saying a bunch of crap about being able to meld with the floor until it’s comfortable etc. (*Tony was incredibly jealous. He didn't have the body of an old man anymore, but he still had a back that protested when shoved against concrete for three hours or when hunched over in the lab for too long*).

"You’re not rebuilding the arm, are you?"

Vision asks, not looking away from the bubbles in his drink (*Tony needed to help him get a better hobby...wait. What did he say?*).
"No!"

Tony cries vehemently, sitting up and whirling on his friends.

“If he gets one, it won’t be from me and it damn well won’t be before he’s cleared for the field! What do you take me for?!”

Vision hums in affirmation, unbothered by his outburst, and Rhodey smirks.

“What?”

Tony demands, squinting at them both suspiciously.

“What is it?”

Rhodey’s smirk widens and he swirls his drink mischievously. Tony snatches it from his hands and downs it, taking petty satisfaction in his sad sad protests (Tony made those drinks, thank you very much. He didn’t deserve to be mocked with them).

"Ok, ok,"

Rhodey says, pouting at Vision to pass the pitcher (he didn’t because he was a good son, Tony's favourite child, the apple of his eye-),

"It’s just satisfying that you won’t cave. That you’ll fix him up but you won’t give him any more gifts.”

Rhodey laughs nastily and Tony’s brain is struggling to keep up. He knew Rhodey was bitter, but sometimes it still caught him off guard how deep that bitter loyalty could go when it mattered. He didn't figure that Rhodey would spite anybody a functional limb.

“It’s somehow more satisfying that you’ll take care of his pains and ONLY his pains. I remember you sitting in the workshop for hours,”

Rhodey runs a hand along his legs and winces,

“Hours and hours for people who didn’t deserve it. You always gave them more than what they asked for. It’s just good to see you in a place where no one can really complain, but you aren’t over-extending yourself.”

He gives up on his legs and reaches out towards Tony instead, turning the sad eyes full blast. Tony groans and grabs him the mojito pitcher. Right as he goes to pass it over, there’s a shutter sound.

Carol grins at them unabashedly, holding her phone in her hands.

“That expression was too cute to ignore.”

She says, while Rhodey looks absolutely horrified.

“I’m gonna make it my wallpaper.”

“Carol, no!”
He says, while Tony cries,

“Carol, yes!”

The lab in the compound was Tony’s safest place. Nobody was allowed to simply barge in. He didn’t even allow the New Avengers or the kids in for much - Vision and Rhodey were the only people who were there with any kind of regularity. Nobody else had gotten to know the bots here (Harley had taught U to play battleship in California and how to Skype, while Peter often visited when Tony had still been in the tower. He hadn’t shown RiRi or Donny his mechanical kids yet. He had no idea how to make the invitation. The others had kind of just...wandered in, but this lab was locked down at all times).

It was his home and he was going to bring Barnes in there.

In retrospect, it was clearly a terrible idea. Tony would know - he was full of them. He’d made the offer though and he wasn’t about to back out. Once Tony Stark committed to something, he didn’t back out (unless it annoyed someone he didn’t like, or he was coerced into the invite, or something more interesting came along...).

He paced the length of the entire space. If he was being honest, he missed his lab in the tower. He missed the sprawling space, the multiple floors, the central location. But the compound was safer and contained, ultimately, fewer bitter memories. Maybe it was a good thing that he finally wanted to be back in the tower (something like moving on, he’d have to ask his therapist)?

"Boss,"

Friday called out, startling Tony badly enough that he jumped,

“You’re talking to yourself. And trying to distract yourself. If you’d like, I could queue up some projects for you?”

Tony grumbled, kicking at a desk chair (he stubbed his toe and swore revenge on T’Challa. Meow Mix didn’t have enough bad things happening in his life to make up for Tony’s current condition. Ugh, why did he ever take the Rogues back from Wakanda?).

"Why am I doing this, Fri? Wait, don’t answer that."

Tony groans.

"Considering your refusal to communicate with your therapist, I would speculate-“

"Fribaby, cmon, I said don’t answer-“

"That you are following a previously established pattern of behavior-“

"Previously established? I’ve never done something like- well, ok, I mean-“

"Wherein you simultaneously ask for forgiveness and punishment from people you expect to betray you, perhaps out of some perceived sense of wrongdoing-“

"I - hey - I do not! I don’t do that!”

"Which, according to the transcripts of Mr Barnes’ sessions-“
"Friday! Great Scott, that’s invasive, who raised you—"

"Is a pattern that may result in some kind of mutually assured destruction between the two of you if left unchecked."

Tony gapes. Well then. He uh, he hadn’t really thought he had anything in common with Barnes. Not that he actually believed Friday. He didn’t - he didn’t do anything that masochistic (except for that time when he’d dug through Obie’s old files, oh and when he’d preserved JARVIS’ core-). Besides, he was making headway, growing up, being mature and all of that (he hadn’t even forgotten a major event in the last three months, though Extremis could be the cause-).

"You’re mumbling again, Boss."

Friday says, and, by Tesla’s sad sad grave, he was so offended because there was SMUGNESS in that tone.

"I know my mouth was shut that time!"

He snipes back at her.

“'You were projecting into my servers, Roboss.'"

She sasses him, she SASSES him (his kids were so rude!!!!).  

"I am SENSITIVE about the whole robot thing!"

He cries out, and he actually means it a little bit. He’d been letting it slip his mind more often lately, getting used to it and all that, but the reminder burned him a little. It probably wasn’t fair to Friday or Vision, but damn, after having her say he had something in common with Barnes that was just uncool (Barnes was less cyborg than him now, yikes).

Friday pauses for a moment where Tony thinks she’ll apologize, however it seems she’s really learning lately (or that he’d finally been giving her the chance to know him), because she dryly says,

“'And I’m sensitive about having my perfect memory questioned. I’m not old enough to be compared to Dum-E.'"

Tony sputters, hearing an offended series of beeps come from one of his tool closets.

“'Are you calling your older brother a grandpa?'"

He asks, walking over to free Dum-E from his makeshift prison (there was a broom handle jamming the bottom of the door. Butterfingers was probably up to no good again).

"'I’m a lady in my prime,"

Friday says (dry as a desert),

“'And so, to your delicate HUMAN sensibilities, my 30 year older brother is practically dust.'"

Dum-E shrills at her, waving an angry claw at the nearest camera. Tony absentely pats it, chuckling when Dum-E immediately crowds close like an excited dog.

Tony builds a Jenga tower with his bots for the next hour (sufficiently bullied into it by Friday’s
increasingly droll responses to his mumbling). Every time it falls, it gets harder since the boys aren’t interested in rebuilding properly. The rules are also growing increasingly complex (“U, cmon, you JUST took out three blocks at once last round to skip three turns. Why can’t I? Because I have thumbs!? How is that cheating!!??”).

His fun is interrupted, of course, by the return of his anxiety and his latest mistake.

Standing forlornly in his doorway, trapped on the other side of the glass, Bucky Barnes looks exactly like the kind of mistake Tony would make.

Starting on Barnes’ shoulder is slow going. He honestly has no idea how to act around the man. Should he show him around the lab? That implied he was allowed back, so probably not. Even so, Barnes was staring around in absolute awe with a billion questions buzzing underneath his skin (should Tony warn him about the boys? Should he just keep them away? Should he-).

Within a minute (or longer...he hopes it wasn’t longer), Tony realizes he’s just been standing there with the door open, watching Barnes turn in circles and admire his lab space. He glares at the nearest camera, knowing Friday is silently judging him for his distraction. When he shifts his gaze to Barnes, he finds him already looking back with a single eyebrow cocked.

”Don’t sass me.”

Tony grumbles, striding away to the workbench he had set aside for today.

“I don’t know what to do with a cyborg star-“

Before Tony can finish, a questioning beep sounds from the tool closet. Again.

”You’re not a cyborg Dum-E.”

Tony says flatly, refusing to crack a smile in front of Barnes, who was staring at the tool closet like it was a threat (if he destroyed any of Tony’s furniture, Tony was going to make the new shoulder mooring pink leopard print and send photos to Pink Panther and his little sister).

“You are entirely machined, no biological components included.”

Another beep (chiding this time) and the door to the closet rattled. The collapsed Jenga tower was in front of it (Tony hoped Barnes didn’t know about Jenga. He hoped Barnes wasn’t looking at the mess in here at all. Hell, he hoped Barnes just left and never came back).

”I am 90% organic!”

Tony yelled,

”The carbon in you doesn’t count!”

Barnes snorted, a soft smile playing at the corners of his mouth, and Tony frowned at him (Tony wanted to die. That smile was bizarrely charming and looked terrible on such a creepy man). Without another word, he freed Dum-E and pointed for him to go hang out with the other boys in the far corner or the lab. Dum-E, little contrarian that he was, ignored him and rolled up to Barnes.

Tony's heart rate picked up in a distinctly panicked way when Barnes lifted his arm. He moved,
slapping it down.

"Dum-E."

He said, a threat hovering just under the surface of his cool tone,

“Go.”

Realizing that he’d made a mistake but not what it was, Dum-E rolled tentatively away. Tony refused to look at Barnes, knowing that his past few actions had given away a lot more than he was comfortable with.

"Sit,”

He gestures at the stool with a waspish jerk of his head,

“Get comfortable.”

Warily, Barnes sinks into his seat.

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Tony was uncomfortable, that was clear as day. Bucky took in his stiff movements, the deliberate angling of his body away, the large gap between them, and the way he’d responded to his robot trying to get anywhere near Bucky. It was honestly a little insulting that he thought Bucky would do something to it. Fear wasn’t always rational though, and Bucky had given Tony plenty of reasons to be wary (he winced, shame punching him repeatedly in the gut. He was getting really sick of this emotional yoyoing).

"If you’re uncomfortable with having me here...”

Bucky trails off at the dangerous jut of Tony’s jaw. The man abruptly looked like he was spoiling for a fight (was it abrupt? Tony seemed to look that way more and more often around him).

"We can do this somewhere el-“

Tony cuts Bucky off with a sharp chop of his hand.

“I am uncomfortable. Who wouldn’t be uncomfortable alone in a room with you?”

He says, beginning to pace the length of his workbench,

“I am extremely uncomfortable with you all of the time. However, I’m not a coward.”

Bucky considers protesting that he KNOWS that, but Tony steamrolls ahead,

“I’m not a coward and I refuse to be one now. I’m not going to be scared of you anymore, Snowflake. I’m going to face my fears and maybe my therapist will leave me the hell alone.”

Bucky blinked. He was honestly a little surprised Tony was in therapy. Or rather that he was still in therapy and, apparently, deferring to his therapist. He seemed like the kind of man who didn’t deal well with people telling him what to do, though the Accords were somewhat counter to that (he
remembered all the gossip he’d heard in Wakanda, T’Challa’s frustration, and some evidence he’d turned up in his own research. However, he’d seen Tony defer to both Rhodey and Carol even if he’d never really listened to Steve. This was a puzzle that would require more observation.

"Stop trying to puzzle me out, Abominable Soldier”

Tony said, glaring at the space somewhere above Bucky’s eyes (which was incredibly childish, wow). Bucky tried to answer, but Tony tutted him into submission.

He started with scans, Friday explaining everything as they went, Tony reading the results in sullen silence. Eventually, he gathered what he wanted and generated a 3D projection of the shoulder.

"Are you going to be alright looking at this?"

Tony asked in a clipped tone (there was concern there, no matter how he tried to hide it).

“Yeah,”

Bucky responded, sidling around Tony (making sure to stay in view) to interact with hologram himself,

“This is incredible.”

"Don’t go complimenting yourself,”

Tony mumbled, gesturing to show Bucky how to expand and rotate the image,

“It’s your fucking shoulder.”

"You know that’s not what I meant.”

Bucky responds softly and Tony’s expression closes off even further. Despite the obvious tension, Bucky thinks things have been going pretty well. So he has to be proven wrong the second Tony lays a hand on his shoulder to remove the silicon cap there.

He can’t remember anything after that. He hasn’t moved at all by the time he finally regains his focus and Tony isn’t armed or injured, so he supposes nothing too terrible happened. His chest feels like an elephant has stepped on it, though. And also...

"Is that..."

He struggles to get enough air to make his voice more substantial than a wheeze,

“Is that a cat hologram?”

"Meet Pan.”

Tony says (so casually it must be false - he was using Extremis to keep his heartrate and breathing steady again).

"The goat guy?"

Bucky asks, staring stupidly at the holo cat attacking his shoelaces.
“No,”

Tony grimaced,

“Pandemonium. She’s part of a panic protocol.”

The cat meowed victoriously when Bucky huffed, moving his boot away from it. It slow blinked at him, seemingly content with itself, before dissolving in a sparkly light show. Bucky reaches out to run his fingers through the sparks, but moved the wrong (nonexistent) arm. The shoulder mooring made a God awful noise and Tony flinched.

"Get out."

Tony sighed and hurt speared through Bucky (if he ever just managed to keep his cool, managed to keep his head screwed on right, maybe he could’ve finally shown Tony that-).

"Don’t come back until you’re actually ready for this."

Tony sounded angry. Bucky felt like utter shit, but some detached part of him couldn’t help but notice Tony’s heart beat was still perfect (and that was important somehow, though he couldn’t, ugh his head was all mixed up).

“I don’t want to be used as a tool for self flagellation.”

Tony finished, waving Bucky out of the lab and turning his back on him

"Hypocrite."

Bucky hissed and left, wishing he could slam the lab door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Woooooosh, sorry for the huge delay everybody. There were some bad vibes in the comments section and I just wasn't all that into it, so I tried writing something else for a bit and then got crushed with school. Updates def won't be daily for awhile.

Tony: Look, I just want to make sure you aren't using me in the way I'm using you.
Bucky: Did you just say you're using me?
Tony: hOW daRE!!!!!!
Chapter Summary

Tony flirts through toppling the military industrial complex, Bucky gets a history boner, and articles are exchanged because everyone is a big nerd.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first two times Bucky comes back, Tony won’t let him in. It’s frustrating and devastating in unprecedented ways. Bucky knows, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he’s overreacting. It’s not like he was given an exact date to come back, though. It’s not like Tony gave him a worksheet to fill out about his health. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do.

He suppressed his irritation for two weeks before finally cracking in a therapy appointment and making a snide comment to his therapist. They're on the shooting range, and Bucky misses his next shot by a millimetre when he realizes what he just said (the target practice was all a ruse to prevent him from continuing to clam up, damn it).

While he scowls, his therapist pulls out a familiar paper and starts scribbling on it. After a few minutes of checking with his notes, he folds it up and puts it in his chest pocket, patting it smugly. Bucky eyes it. He wants to see it.

Furtively glancing at his therapist's pocket, Bucky starts talking about other things. He talks about how he’s finally managed to go on a few outings with Sam, though they haven’t left the compound (they'd admired the space on the roof he'd fought Jessica on while Bucky threatened to fight Sam, toured Vision's zen garden while insulting one another, and run laps outside before Sam tripped Bucky into the dirt). How him and Steve could talk more easily now that he was starting to process his guilt and anger with somebody else. How he’d danced with Natasha without it bringing up entirely murderous feelings (maybe 50% murderous? Probably closer to 65%)

His therapist nods along, nudging him to look more closely at his own feelings, evaluate himself more fairly...everything is normal. It is a completely standard session between the two of them. Maybe even a little better than usual. But that paper is still in his therapist's pocket and Bucky...Bucky is a man of many fixations. And that paper has something to do with Tony Stark.

"What did you write down?"

He finally asks, aiming for casual and missing by a mile (unable to ignore it any longer). His therapist eyes him, tapping his scarred and gnarled fingers against his chest. "Why didn’t you ask me right away?"

He asks and Bucky grinds his teeth.

“I thought you’d bring it up or hand it over at some point.”

He responds. His therapist snorts,
“Why didn’t you wait until the end of the session, then? Why ask now?”

Bucky slips into the skin of somebody else (somebody who isn’t lying to his therapist). He blinks innocently, but then the old man pulls out the paper and adds another note to it.

Frustrated anger boils underneath his skin. Despite it, he hold onto the face of an innocent bystander,

“I was beginning to think I had to ask to see it, so I did.”

Now his therapist was squinting at him suspiciously,

“I’m just taking notes on your progress, same as always.”

Bucky smiles guilelessly,

“Oh, can I see? It will help me with my self perspective.”

His therapist hums, pretending to mull the question over (Bucky was insulted. He knew that man could pretend better than that),

“I think you’re doing just fine developing that skill on your own. My notes won’t mean much to you.”

Bucky can sense the trap a million miles away. He was never all that well trained as a spy (Hydra preferring him for brute force), but the Red Room had taught him more than enough. However, if he doesn’t go for the trap, he won’t get any answers about that paper. If he steals it, Friday will know and will tattle on him. If he stops asking for it, his therapist won’t give it up.

He wants to know what it says.

”Just show me the notes, old man.”

He growls, giving up his facade. His therapist grins like the asshole he is, noting down one more thing before passing it over with a flourish.

It's a worksheet about his ability to self-evaluate. He’s filled out this exact one before. The notes on it aren’t actual notes though - they’re new questions for Bucky to answer. Namely,

“*If you couldn’t let this go, do you really think you’re ready to be alone in a volatile situation with Tony Stark? If so, why?*”

And,

“*Why did you feel the need to conceal this situation?*”

And, ugh,

“*Does this behaviour take your own need for security and emotional stability into account?*”

There're also a few sentences written in red at the bottom:

"*If I give you an all-clear on your ability to consent to this procedure, you'll likely be allowed to go back. However, you tried to manipulate me in ways that aren’t conducive to your self-betterment.*"
"Considering this, do you think I, as a professional, should provide you with such documentation?"

Bucky grits his teeth hard enough that he feels his jaw pop and creak.

"Safety on, Sergeant Barnes."

His therapist says, continuing to tap his fingers against his chest (soothing some of Bucky's mounting irritation at being so thoroughly cornered).

"Why did you agree to me being your therapist?"

He asks, seemingly apropos of nothing. Bucky is still glaring at the evaluation sheet when he responds,

“Because I wanted to learn how to be a safe person to be around.”

"For others?"

His therapist asks and Bucky nods,

“How about for yourself too, Sergeant Barnes?”

Bucky hesitates, struggling with himself. His immediate answer was yes. However, that provoked a hot coal of shame to lodge itself in his throat (did he deserve that? Did he deserve to give himself anything when he was still causing so many problems for other people? When he'd done so much damage?).

"Do you want to be safe for yourself? Is that what you want?"

Want. Not deserve. Bucky was far more familiar (too familiar) with wanting than he was with deserving. He nodded again, crumpling the paper in his hand.

"Then take that paper home and think about the questions I’ve asked you. After you’ve thought about them, fill out the evaluation sheet. I haven’t given you homework in awhile."

His therapist's tone is final.

Stiffly, Bucky rose from his crouch, unloading his gun, stuffing his ammo back into its box, checking the gun over for any issues (safety on) before hanging it up. He left silently, ghosting out of the room without even saying goodbye.

He goes back to the workshop again without answering the questions on the sheet. Tony flips him off through the door, a pinched and tired look on his face (exhausted with Bucky's hounding). He goes to the gym and lingers with his hand hovering over Tony’s favourite piece of equipment before slapping himself sharply.

He fills out the questions. The results are embarrassing.
"Why haven’t you been back?"

Tony demands, appearing so abruptly in the gym that Bucky almost drops the dumbbell he’d been lifting onto his toe. He swears, fumbling it and then catching, his shoulder mooring making the same crackling sound that had started somewhere between punching Steve and dancing with Natasha.

It's been awhile, but Tony still focuses on that noise like a dog hearing a whistle. Manic energy surrounds him as he hovers his hand over Bucky's shoulder, whispering,

“It’s ok, Darling. I’m gonna fix you right up.”

Which uh...did things...to Bucky. Tony was definitely talking to the machinery, but the machinery was INSIDE of Bucky and Tony was being real sweet to it.

"So why haven’t you been back?”

Tony demands again, withdrawing his hand and shoving it through his wild curls. He seemed tired in the same way children did after too much sugar. Or PhD students did if Bucky understood Sam’s jokes properly (he would never ask - if he gave Sam the slightest upper hand he’d never hear the end of it).

"Are you alr-"

He begins, only to be steamrolled by Tony (he’s beginning to sense a pattern).

“You are terrible at answering questions, White Pasha.”

"Was that a roundabout way of calling me beautiful?”

Bucky blurts, nearly slapping himself in the face with the dumbbell when he goes to cover his mouth. Tony stares at him, blank incomprehension written all over his face. It’d be nice to finally stun Tony Stark if he’d managed to do it with anything but stupidity.

"White Pasha? Russian general? Revered as a pretty boy in American journals?”

Bucky keeps going because living with Steve Rogers didn’t raise him a quitter (even when he should really quit).

"You studied Russian history?”

Tony asked, head cocked to the side (which was cute. Why was that cute? Tony was in his 40s and could probably throw him through a wall).

"The Great Game was a lesson in how American and Russian culture intersected, but with more spying and toppling governments.”

Bucky told him, shrugging,

“It was useful to read up on back when I first realized I was going to be drafted.”

He would never admit he also read up on it for all of the embarrassing British military failures. He’d been bitter and had wanted some topical ammunition when he hit the mixed units.
Tony's eyebrows lifted,

"Drafted?"

Bucky nodded and Tony was suddenly leaning in way too close to his face with a salacious smirk,

"Do tell, Sergeant."

"Not much to tell,"

Bucky said, finally putting down the dumbbell before he did anything stupid with it (**like give it to Tony as a gift. He still wasn't over his gifting phase. He woke up every day remembering it and feeling horribly embarrassed**),

"I didn’t want to go to war. I knew exactly what it would do to me - empty me out and leave nobody to watch over Steve. The United States government didn’t care though, so I got my draft card and got shipped out."

Tony’s eyes were glowing brightly. This close, Bucky could see the faintest impression of a design reminiscent of the arc reactor in the iris.

"Did you know..."

Tony said, stalking in a circle around Bucky,

"That all official records state that you enlisted willingly? Did it the second you thought Rogers could survive on what income you shared."

There's curiosity in Tony's tone. It isn’t just a jab at Bucky’s choices (**at the shame associated with being a wishful draft dodger or nannying another man**). He genuinely wants an answer.

"No,"

Bucky says slowly (**breathing shallowly as Tony circled too close to him, smelling of that certain something good**),

"I had no idea. I never looked to see what people thought of me...back then."

He supposes he’s been used for propaganda - Captain America and his best friend fighting for freedom. It bothered him a little, having that choice stripped away (**why hadn’t Steve spoken up? Had he even realized Bucky didn’t want to go? Knowing him, probably not**).

"We could tell them,"

Tony says, stepping in front of Bucky again,

"Flip off the government and say the worlds longest held POW was drafted against his will. Take a swing at the whole system."

Tony is bouncing in place (**practically vibrating out of his skin**),

"Did you know how many people are coerced into the military to this day? How many unwilling soldiers fight and lose their lives because it’s their only escape from poverty?"
Bucky knew Tony cared, he’d researched that much, but seeing it in person, especially directed to
the military he kept himself so distant from was...

Tony was manic from no sleep or something of that sort, but his passion was genuine. It was like a
bonfire, warming the chill between them.

”It could give them back a fragment of autonomy, knowing a hero was forced to fight in a war, that it
went south for him, but he came out the other side and spoke out about it”

Tony was saying, hands waving as he practically painted a picture. He grabbed Bucky’s hand,

“What were you before the draft?”

Bucky answered without a thought,

“A dandy,”

Then coughing with embarrassment,

“A mechanic when they could afford me. A dockhand when they couldn’t. A repairman to fill in the
gaps.”

”A mechanic!”

Tony crowed, lifting Bucky’s hand high before swinging it down,

“They’ll see you and they’ll see themselves. If you did a couple jobs here and there, worked on some
fixer uppers, those kids could see it isn’t over. They can still be a mechanic!”

Tony’s smile brightened even further,

“I’ll do it! A technical school scholarship...no, internship...for army brats below the poverty line. Set
them up to build a car with an All American Snowball. What could go wrong?”

He kissed Bucky’s knuckles, a gleeful air about him, and whirled away across the room. Bucky’s
empty hand grasped at nothing, his mouth opening and closing uselessly.

”Why...?”

He asks, and Tony slaps a hand against the door,

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a
theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

He announced in a perfect impression of Churchill, though Bucky was damn sure that quote was
Eisenhower, and then slammed the door.

The next morning, Tony wakes up to a feeling of foreboding and Rhodey watching a video in their
bed.
“I won’t build him an arm,”

Rhodey says in a high pitch voice,

“I’m not an idiot, Rhodey! I’m just gonna build him a charity!”

Tony groans and buries his head under the covers. Maybe if he buried himself deep enough all of this would go away.

_____

”He kissed my hand,”

Bucky tells his therapist while leaning over his desk,

“He’s making a charity he wants me to help with...I think!”

His therapist chuckles and asks,

“You didn’t try to get him to stay? To talk to him?”

Bucky blinks.

“No,”

He says in shock,

“He just started talking and I wanted to hear what he had to say. He was so excited I just let him go."

His therapist folds up his assessment into a paper crane, carefully smoothing the lines with his damaged hand.

”He is quite interesting once he goes off on a tangent.”

He agrees, tugging the crane's head so that its tail waggled,

“If he comes back of his own volition, perhaps you can hear more about his projects.”

It doesn’t occur to Bucky until hours later, when he has mumbled,

“He kissed my hand.”

To Steve on loop (enough times that Steve got up and left with a grimace), that their entire interaction had nothing to do with their shared past. It had nothing to do with apologizing or self-betterment or even affirmation. It had been completely neutral ground, despite the topic.

He’d enjoyed it. It hadn’t proven a single thing and he’d enjoyed it

Safety on.
He slinks back to the lab a few days later without his therapist's evaluation. He leaves an article about
draft dodgers shaming their country, one that dated back to the month before he’d shipped out, at the
door with Friday’s permission.

He gets an article sent to his tablet written by a man who had run off to Italy in the middle of WWII
who, because of his escape, had managed to develop a secure line of supplies from sympathizers to
the US army from his cozy country home.

“I was happy there,”

A highlighted quote reads,

“Not because violence couldn’t touch me - I know a war like that touches everyone - but because I
could be who I was meant to be. War blossomed in my heart without emptying me. I was full. I was
home.”

He sends back the article with a note tagged on;

“The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.”

He thinks Tony will like it.

Tony doesn’t talk to him again after that, but several weeks later Bucky gets his all-clear. He sends it
to Tony for his perusal and is surprised to hear back from him within the hour.

"Let's get this over with."

He says. Bucky breathes deep and heads to the workshop.

Safety on. Please, safety on.

Chapter End Notes

I know that this is a little critique heavy and some people are sensitive about the topic, so
please don't think I'm insulting the US Army or anything. I'm knocking the aspects of
the military that are propaganda-heavy and disproportionately target struggling youths.
I'm also critiquing the more negative aspects of a draft, though I won't deny that a draft
has its purposes and that WWII desperately needed soldiers.

Anyway, the Great Game is a real thing! It was essentially a giant political struggle
between Russia and Britain over several key locations (namely Afghanistan, India, and
several over central/southern Asian countries) during the 19th century. It is often hailed
in historical texts as a great era for spying and political intrigue, romance and daring, but
the reality of it is infinitely more embarrassing. The British crown made many frankly
terrible military decisions and repeatedly overestimated both their control over their
colonies and Russia's interest in them. India and Afghanistan repeatedly struggled to
gain some form of independence as the British became progressively more oppressive to keep out Russian forces, and then America got involved...

It was an era of Russian-American friendship, really. Weird to think of now. Americans were inspired by Russian culture and were especially intrigued by Cossacks. White Pasha (Mikhail Skobelev) was a Russian general that was legendary on the field and uh........super ruthless. He liked wearing a white uniform while mounted on a white horse. Very romantic, even when he was slaughtering women and children (/s). Several American journalists and spies were super duper gay for him, both due to his military prowess and because of how pretty he was. They weren't big fans of some of that murder, though.
KHA

Chapter Summary

The robot uprising is nigh and Tony Bears are much more marketable than Bucky Bears.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This time, Tony actually manages to get the shoulder cap off of Barnes without incident (he breathes a sigh of relief when Barnes isn't looking). He has had to change his approach a little, be a bit more personal (tapping the fingers of his off hand against his chest and murmuring reassurances while not thinking about how naturally those reassurances were coming to him), but it's not too much of a hardship. After the mooring was fixed he would never have to talk to Barnes again.

It would be fine. They weren't becoming friends or anything.

Once the cap comes off (the silicone was looking a little warped and Tony frowned at it. Hadn't he gotten this in Wakanda? Tony was pretty sure Wakandan materials were basically invulnerable at this point. What had Barnes done to the damn thing?), Barnes' breathing stalls into nothing and Friday immediately unleashes Protocol Panic A-Cat. Tony backs away to put a workbench between them. Pan works faster this time, getting Barnes' eyes to track within minutes and his breathing to steady soon after (had the rudimentary AI running her adjusted to Barnes or had Barnes adjusted to her? He itched to look at the data. And to know if Barnes liked cats - no, no he didn't care about that, it wasn't important to know if a 6 foot something beefcake played with kittens in his spare-stop!!!)

"Back in the land of the living, Romero?"

Tony asks. He isn't looking at Bucky at all, trying to give him some kind of privacy (and trying to get his brain to shut up. It had been pestering him constantly since this weird thing of allowing Barnes anywhere near him started up).

"Wish I wasn't."

Bucky rasps. Pan yowls in a distinctly offended tone.

"Don't tell her she did a bad job."

Tony scolds,

"Pet her and call her a good girl so she can be on her way."

When he doesn't hear anything, Tony drums his fingers against his thigh impatiently, blurring,

"Well? You gonna be nice to my cat or not?"

"Thanks, Pan."
Bucky says,

“Y’did good being cute n all, little bugger.”

She chirps happily, then winds over to Tony instead of disappearing. Damn his bio monitors - his blood pressure was only a little bit up (or had Pan just learned to recognize what situations would trigger him? That would suck - at least she was confined to the workshop. He couldn’t imagine seeing Scarlet Witch and having a holo cat mystically appear to bitch him back into a zen state).

"Yes, yes, darling, I’m proud of you. I’m very calm, see?"

He soothes her, stroking his fingers through the light that made up her head. Friday ghosted a pink shimmering projection of a hand (slim fingers, delicate bones, manicured nails) just underneath his to actually pet Pan (he sends a thought her way of a kitten tumbling through her code. The pink hand flips and intertwines its fingers with his before disappearing). She nipped at him playfully, needlepoint teeth passing straight through him, then turning into a shower of sparks.

”Are you alright to continue?”

Tony asks, looking up to find Barnes watching him with a tender expression on his face. It was a dead ringer for how Steve used to look at him when he’d kiss the toaster or scatter Avengers merch around the communal floor. It’s incredibly disconcerting (his heart throbs painfully in his chest, a phantom pain racing down his arm). He winces and Barnes’ doe eyes are gone in an instant (guilt and something worse leave a bitter taste in Tony's mouth. He didn't want to remember that version of Steve).

”M’good.”

Barnes mumbles, swivelling his stool so the exposed metal in his shoulder was easily accessible (though those shoulders were bunched forward like Barnes wanted to hug himself. Did anybody ever hug Barnes? Nobody ever really touched Steve before-). Tony forces himself to go back to work.

He spends two hours picking it over, backing away every time Barnes started to zone out. He could probably continue talking to Barnes or something, try to keep him present, but he didn’t want to draw Barnes’ laser focus again (certainly not while he was vulnerable or thinking about the time he was dumb enough to trust some beefy hunk from the 40s).

Finally, Barnes starts to shake minutely and Tony lays his tools to the side. He awkwardly pats his incredibly solid chest before snapping his hand back like it had been burned.

"We're done for now.”

Tony says, scratching at his beard and wishing to be anywhere but here. Barnes doesn’t respond immediately, and Tony just barely manages to wait him out. By the time he finally answers, Barnes looks like he’s just swallowed a mouthful of soap (Tony resists the urge to crack a joke about it, especially because anything starting with “did your mama...” is bad ground for them).

"Did you get everything you needed?”

Barnes asks in a strained voice and Tony scoffs,
“Of course not. Integrating machinery with biology is insanely complicated. I can’t just stare at it for a few hours and then recreate or fix it.”

He drums his fingers against his chest and pauses when he notices Barnes relaxing. The second the motion stops, the man’s shoulders wind tight again (it's weird - was Tony's obvious discomfort relaxing him or did he have a similar self soothing gesture? Not that Tony cared. He didn't. He was just a curious man filled to the brim with curiosity).

”You’ll have to come back a few times.”

Tony tells him, averting his eyes when Barnes begins to smile (why did that make him happy, oh lord did he enjoy awkward silences and panic attacks?!?!),

“But no more today. I’m not letting you have another meltdown in here for my own sake.”

The awkward atmosphere gets ten times stronger when Barnes thanks him quietly (sincerely, putting way too much emotion behind it) before slipping out of the room (throwing a lingering look over his shoulder at Tony).

"What am I doing?"

Tony whispers, burying his face in his hands. He was NOT warming up to Barnes. He wasn’t.

And if he was, well, it was just a product of not enough sleep and too much manic fending off of anxiety.

________

Their next session is a disaster. Tony won’t talk to Barnes during it. He’d slept poorly for three days thinking about the soft look on Barnes’ face and how it matched Steve exactly. In his nightmares, Barnes’ lips would turn up, he would reach out his single hand to rest against Tony's chest gently, soothingly, a gesture Pepper had always used before the Mandarin made his PTSD too powerful to handle someone touching him there, and then he would ruthlessly crush the arc reactor (eyes still soft, terrifyingly so). He’d whisper sweet nothings the entire time Tony choked.

So yeah, Tony had slipped right past 'manic friendliness' into 'everything is awful and I'm going to make sure everyone knows it'. He probably shouldn't have let Barnes into the workshop at all, however he had wanted to just...get it over with. He didn't want another sleepless night.

Barnes clocks out like five minutes in. Pan works a few times, but he keeps disappearing back into his own head.

Tony knows just talking to him would make this better. He KNOWS it (why can’t he do it?). His frustration is beginning to affect his manual work with the series of probes he was using to determine the main stress and potential slip points of the shoulder. He poked Barnes sharply and startled when his hand closed over the tool Tony had been using, warping it (fear spiked through Tony, sharp and uninvited).

"Who talks to him?"

Tony asks Friday in a low voice, twitching when Barnes’ hand slid down the tool to grasp his wrist in a deceptively light hold.
"Other than Steve."

Tony added on hurriedly, distinctly not wanting to have a repeat of game night's disaster.

"Miss Romanov, Boss."

Friday responds. She hesitates for a moment, then carefully says,

"Would it not be more prudent to contact his therapist?"

Tony jerks in his seat,

"No!"

He says loudly and, when Barnes flinches, repeats more quietly,

"No. I don’t want to invade his privacy unless absolute necessary. Call Itsy Bitsy."

Natasha appears at his door a few minutes later (*windblown but otherwise impeccable - she’d clearly run here even if she’d cleaned up a bit before coming in*). Barnes is beginning to develop a death grip on him when he waves her in.

Barnes’ freaky intense gaze settles on her and he stands, tucking Tony behind his body. Frankly, it’s a combination of unsettling and charming. Either Barnes was saving him for later like a panther jamming a kill in a tree, or he actually thought Tony needed protection. Maybe T’Challa would know - Tony still hadn't found the time to annoy him-

Barnes growled (*hot - wait, fuck. No. Just...no*).

Natasha put her hands up and shot Tony a questioning look that Barnes moved to intercept, completely blocking Tony's view like he thought Natasha was a gorgon. Luckily, he has Extremis and could watch through the cameras. Tony sighed - alright, he was being protected. Weird, but he could work with that more easily than murder...

Probably.

"Hey there Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny..."

He sings and Natasha rolls her eyes, finishing with,

"Yellow Polka Dot Bikini."

It’s sufficient to confuse Barnes a bit and prevent him from entering insta-death mode or something. Tony pats his bulging bicep (*it doesn’t give at all under his hand. He feels slightly bitter about it. Just a smidge*).

"Barnes has officially left the building. He also won’t stop touching me, which is admittedly not my favourite thing."

Natasha huffs, spearing him with a ‘I can clearly see that, moron’ look. She was always so eloquent with her eyes. Fascinating, considering they were usually the part of her that lied the hardest.

She glared (*oops, maybe she could read minds*).
"I need somebody to talk to him, return him to the land of the living, unthaw the icicle jammed right up his-"

"It sounds like you’ve got the talking part covered."

Natasha says flatly. He frowns at her - of course she’s fishing for information while she has the chance (spies, they were all the same).

"I’m extremely uncomfortable."

He admits grudgingly, refusing to give up more and banking on the fact that she regrets not trusting him before enough to back off. She blinks and grimaces in an ugly enough way that he knows she’s actually sorry (Natasha always looked weird when she was being genuine. Maybe because her face wasn't used to emoting normally? Or maybe it was on purpose - hr never knew with Natasha).

She spends the next twenty minutes talking to Barnes, randomly flipping through languages and stories as she goes, until he finally releases Tony's wrist. Then she creeps closer, finally getting within almost touching distance before Barnes takes a swipe at her. She looks offended, which is kind of hilarious (whatever the relationship between those two was, it was clearly close. Beyond the sex thing Natasha implied before, that is).

"You touched Tony,"

She complains, her annoyance causing some awareness to finally filter in through Barnes ice-cold aggression,

“But nobody is allowed to touch you? Rude, Yasha. Double standards aren't allowed in the Red Room.”

Tony takes advantage of the distraction to fix up his equipment and jam the cap back over Barnes’ shoulder. Barnes tried to grab him again, but Tony slides his armour over his skin and then retracts it (ha! And everyone told him the same trick would never work twice on the Winter Soldier!), letting his body slip away a safe distance. Barnes doesn’t follow, but does look distinctly betrayed.

"I’m not a teddy bear."

Tony grumbles in response, refusing to meet the puppy dog eyes Barnes was throwing him (which were creepy as hell against that murder face, by Tesla's pigeon-loving ghost).

"...Look like one t’me."

Barnes slurs which...what (????????????????????????????????????????). Natasha is baffled. Genuinely baffled, not just 'I am emoting so you know I know how' but straight up 'hey, what the fuck'. Tony empathizes with her (even as he asks Friday to keep photos of this moment). He has absolutely no idea what brought this on.

"I am the scariest thing you’ll ever encounter.”

Tony says flatly, unable to resist the challenge of Barnes calling him soft. Barnes squints at him and Tony does a quick read of his vitals - oh. Huh. He was coming off a CO2 high. Barnes hadn’t really been breathing for awhile there. Maybe he had actually hallucinated-

Barnes gestures at his hair sloppily,
“Soft.”

He says with a little smile,

"Good for squeezing. Like a teddy bear.”

Natasha slowly turns her gaze away from Barnes (Tony's new mortal enemy!!!!!) towards Tony. He sees her trace over every floppy curl on his head (he hadn’t gotten a haircut in awhile, so sue him. It would go badly for her anyway). Her baffled expression is slowly morphing into something more calculated (oh no).

"Well,”

Tony claps his hands, startling Barnes,

“Looks like everything is fine here, so I’m going to leave. The bots will kick you out in exactly five minutes, so chop chop everyone.”

He skirts a wide breadth around both the assassins in his workshop, heading for the safety of Rhodey and his room (teddy bear his famous ass-), when Natasha moves like a viper and reaches out for him (shit shit shit-).

Barnes tackles her to the ground like a linebacker. It's beautiful. It's wonderful. He's not Tony's mortal enemy anymore. Since he doesn’t look particularly murderous, Tony simply guffaws and flees (Natasha whispers “You’ll pay for this”, but Tony is reasonably sure she’s not threatening him. Or not threatening him first. Either way, that's future Tony's problem).

"Let me get this straight,”

Rhodey says in his ‘what is this nonsense’ tone,

“Barnes said your hair is soft,”

Rhodey gives the braid he putting together an experimental tug,

“And good for squeezing.”

"Yup”

Tony says, popping the P while he sags even further into his lovely (spine popping) draped position over Vision's back. Rhodey braiding his hair always hurt a little (‘White people hair. Why is it so slippery? Can’t do shit with this.’) but it was fun and Tony enjoyed the contact (and the waxy blend of something and cocoa butter that smelled divine), so he wasn’t going to complain. Rhodey groaned, tugging Tony's wayward hair back into position,

“I’m going to have to kill that boy,”

He complains,

“Look at what you make me do. Do I want to fight a super soldier?”
He asks. Tony laughs,

"A little bit, sweetpea."

Rhodey ignores him,

“No! Am I going to? Yes! Am I going to win? Doubtful, but I have to keep your honour safe somehow."

Tony laughs harder,

“Put on the suit. Kick his ass!”

"Kick! His! Ass!"

Vision cheers in an absolute monotone. Tony slides sideways off his shoulders, shaking with laughter as Rhodey swears about losing his grip on Tony's hair once again.

"Kick! His! Ass!”

Friday dutifully repeats, equally bland despite the thread of amusement just beneath. Tony's vision blurs with tears. He can picture it now - Rhodey, fully suited, a circle of bots surrounding him as he punches Barnes out while chanting 'kick his ass'.

**It's so good.** It's so good he animates it with Extremis on the fly, absolutely wheezing by the time the animation is playing on the tv for Rhodey. Rhodey shoves him off the bed, but quickly joins him on the floor while snorting and silent-laughing (*the ultimate form of Rhodey's amusement, the level anybody so rarely achieved*).

They both finally stop after several minutes, wiping tears, and then Vision peeks over the edge of the bed.

"Don’t,”

Rhodey gasps, pleading for mercy, but Vision is a Stark and mercy's not in his vocabulary.

"Kick...”

"Don’t!”

Rhodey begs louder.

"His...”

"Please!”

"Ass!”

Everyone on the compound can hear the hysterics, but nobody has the guts to investigate its source.
At team breakfast the next morning, all is well. Tony is more relaxed than he’s been in ages (he finally slept - laughing like that wiped him clean out). He’s mediating between the kids - RiRi has socked Peter in the side of the head with a slice of buttered toast - while jostling Jessica fondly with his shoulder, waggling his eyebrows at the lipstick stain on Luke’s collar. She grins at him slyly, preparing to whisper something absolutely filthy to him, when Vision phases through the floor at their feet.

Rhodey bursts into the room, Carol on his heels looking panicked, as Rhodey cries out,

“Stop that mad man!”

”Kick! His! Ass!”

Vision deadpans, and Tony instantly starts losing it, reaching desperately for Rhodey who sprints across the room to his side.

”Rhodey!”

He cries out, sniggering,

“I’m not gonna make it! I need you to do one last thing for me!”

"Anything for you, Tones!”

Rhodey tells him soulfully, grasping his own chest.

"I need you to find Barnes...”

Tony says, clutching at Rhodey's hand while tears (of mirth) stream down his cheeks. Peter yells out,

“What’s going on!!!”

While RiRi fishes around in her backpack for her inhaler, which is awfully sweet and wildly unnecessary since Tony became a cyborg.

”And I need you to...to...”

Tony's voice grows weaker and Rhodey brings their foreheads together.

"I'll do it for you, Tones.”

He promises,

“I'll kick his ass.”

Carol films them falling over each other, snorting and generally losing their shit, while chaos erupts in the background as distressed children promise to also kick Barnes’ ass and Vision looks over them all smugly.

She sends it to Rhodey later and tells him he has the ugliest goddamn laugh she’s ever heard. She says it while making a giggle snort that shouldn’t be humanly possible. Tony nudges Rhodey, waggling his eyebrows, and knows his friend has just fallen a little more in love (Carol is everything Tony ever wanted for Rhodey. He's already planning out his best man's speech in his head).
Tony sends the video to Natasha. He provides literally no context. He watches through the security cameras as utter bafflement crosses her features once again and Barton immediately stops eating his grilled cheese to stare at her in amazement (behold! This is a sight previously unseen by any other human!).

Barnes glares at the security camera. Right, enhanced hearing - he probably caught every word of that garbled recording.

Tony stares at Barnes' grouchy features for a long time. Finally, after a long internal debate, Tony sends him the video, too.

He doesn’t watch Barnes through the camera, but he does note that the video has been watched 17 times.

Bucky watches Tony collapse onto Colonel Rhodes, eyes shining with tears instead of electrical energy, and buries his face in his pillow. He’s so fucked. He’s absolutely definitely fucked.

Tony Stark has the stupidest laugh and Bucky loves it (it starts out husky, like something out of a porno, and quickly increases in pitch until he sounds like a whistling kettle). Rhodes is genuinely going to have to kick his ass because otherwise Bucky was going to get on his knees and do something ridiculous like propose.

Fucking embarrassing.

(He kind of wanted to do it anyway, if only to see if it would get Tony to laugh like that again)

Steve's back rested against Bucky’s door as he heard the sound of Tony's voice and laughter play again on loop. It was a sound he had thought he memorized, but he’d never heard it quite like this (had he ever seen Tony, really SEEN him when Rhodes was around? He’d never heard Tony quote anything like poetry before, never seen him do a fashion show with Natasha, never heard the tone he used to speak to children...so no, he probably hadn’t).

A burning ember of jealousy settles low in heart, burning its way down to his stomach and then straight through the floor to Hell where it belonged.

He shouldn’t feel like this (Bucky was his best friend and he’d lost Tony fair and square).

He did anyway.

Chapter End Notes

**Bucky:** Have you ever seen a man so beautiful you cried?

**Bucky:** Because I have. And I called him a teddy bear. Please kill me.
Rhodey: Ok.
Vision: Sure.
Friday: We can do that.
Tony: Haha, funny joke you guys.
RVF: Yeah...a joke...a good goof...a great gaff...some real yukuks...
Bucky: *sweats*
Bucky's next session is awkward and Natasha loiters around for the whole thing, whether Bucky likes it or not. He honestly can't tell if she's there to make the experience better or worse or if she's just there to watch him make a fool of himself. He's ridiculously embarrassingly happy about the whole thing, though (because despite all of his exceedingly weird behaviour, here he was. Tony had let him keep coming back).

Tony quietly listens to Natasha and Bucky's banter (was Real Housewives of New Jersey worse than the show with the child beauty pageants? Was Sam really the worst bird person or was Clint? What was the best shade of black for absorbing blood?) and occasionally lets Natasha run her hands through his hair, spiking it into a goofy faux hawk or little pigtails (Bucky shoots her an “I’ll get you for this” stare that she smirks creepily at. He’s the Winter Soldier, though - he won’t back down from this challenge. The second Tony was gone they were going to throw down and Bucky was going to win).

His silence makes Bucky wish he knew what was going on in Tony's head. He wished he could talk to the guy without setting him off. They’d been making progress, but Bucky didn't want to push it (especially not after seeing Tony and Steve blow up at each other. He never wanted to be the reason Tony was uncomfortable in his own skin ever again).

Bucky was a man of many fixations though, and the urge to be closer, to know more (to eat up all of Tony's knowledge and creativity and attention-), and to stab Natasha with something pointy for being able to touch him was thiiiis close to strangling him.

Tony has managed to map out pretty much everything he needs to know about the mechanics of the shoulder and how he'd like to improve it with respect to range of motion, weight distribution, and reducing gross tissue damage (whatever that arm was made of, it occasionally just turned into a cheese grater against Barnes' skin. Enough pressure and any metal can shred or warp soft tissue, but the fucked up blend of alloys here seemed like it was MEANT to do that. Keep the scar tissue inflamed, keep it expanding and clinging to the metal, then tightening so the arm was always sliding loosely forward and then locking in place just a bit past where a normal joint would allow).

He's bothered by the fine biological components, though. On one hand, he can assume Barnes’ healing will be enough to support any new mooring he shoves into his shoulder, though he already knows it won’t be enough to fix Barnes spine or ribs (anchoring the shoulder and neural relays Tony was never ever going to touch). Barnes could have a nice pain-free shoulder. Theoretically,
Maybe he could even have a cool arm someday.

On the other hand, the monstrous metal arm may have only functioned because the mooring prevented healing around the shoulder. Fixing that might ruin the whole thing, which was assuming Barnes even armed himself again (seeing Barnes on the field, he didn't even really need a new arm. *He was plenty deadly as is*). Tony could potentially fix that by himself with some additional testing and reading.

On the other other hand, Tony had gotten...kind of used to relying on Helen for biology talks lately. She made everything he did better.

Tony fiddled with a projection while Natasha bitched at Barnes about reality tv again.

His last collaboration with Shuri had been interesting, too. It hadn't been biologically-based, but he knew it was an interest of hers (*Wakandan medical technology was fascinating, even if he wasn't allowed to go anywhere near it*). Peter also liked biology, though RiRi couldn't care less. If he only invited Peter, RiRi would be hurt...

"You're mumbling to yourself."

Natasha tells him, balancing a screwdriver on her nose while Pan watches her in fascination - he has no idea who activated that protocol. Did Friday do it? Did one of them ask?

"Bucky asked."

Natasha says and Tony momentarily fears he's been projecting his thoughts all over cyberspace again before realizing he's probably still mumbling.

"Tasha likes cats. Probably because she is one."

Barnes says practically next to Tony's ear. He's leaning way into Tony's space, breathing deep and relaxed (*like a cat sunning itself in a window*). Tony can feel the warmth radiating from his skin. He isn't sure when Barnes crept up on him - he knows he was keeping a good two feet of distance between them while he was working. He pointedly rolls his chair backwards and Natasha snorts when Barnes looks ashamed.

"Call Dr Cho if you're so hung up on creating perfection."

She tells him while rolling her eyes. He flips her off and snarkily asks,

"I thought I didn’t play well with others, Rushman?"

Barnes looks mystified, however Natasha grins toothily,

"You might not like taking orders, but you love taking ideas. I bet if Fury had've tried to win you over with science from the start you would’ve been putty in his hands."

Tony mock-swoons (*Barnes’ hand twitches towards him and Tony resists snorting derisively. He would never swoon for real. He'd once had somebody propose to him with a beautiful handcrafted bot tucked into a ring - they were a teenager so big no to that though the work was lovely - and hadn't swooned, so nothing could down him now*),

"I was awfully fond of Fitzsimmons. Nobody else could’ve kept me, though - Kamala keeps saying
I’m slut for knowledge.”

”Helen probably would’ve seduced you away eventually from what I’ve heard.”

Natasha agrees,

“Or maybe Rhodes would’ve just talked science to you until you fell back into his bed.”

Tony can picture it with perfect clarity - Shield finally getting him into their labs, only for him to be lead by the nose right back out by better tech, Rhodey and Helen flanking him while flipping Nick-Knock the bird.

”My sugarplum never needed to seduce me with his brain.”

He tells Natasha in a stage whisper, biting his lip,

“I crawled into his bed the first day he made me coffee. I kept up the tradition by luring my therapist in with it.”

Natasha cocks an eyebrow,

“Bullshit,”

She says,

“I’ve never seen you drink anything but the darkest swill.”

Tony archly responds (smothering a chuckle),

“I’ve never made anything good in front of you peons - I’m a high-bred boy, remember? My therapist taught me a new method for preparing black coffee, anyway.”

He hums, closing his eyes and licking his lips,

“Brew it black as night, strong as death, sweet as love...that's the kind of coffee that will make you moan.”

He winks at Natasha and then turns back to Barnes to finish his fiddling, only to find the man brick red with a thunderous expression on his face. The combination is oddly amusing considering ‘angry Winter Soldier = instant death’ and all that jazz (maybe it was the splotchiness of the flush? Tony kept getting a kick out of it - human perfection has flaws after all. The Avengers make up artists would have a fit if they ever found out, not that Barnes was going on a press junket potentially ever).

”Does awkward automatically translate to murder squared on your face or are you actually angry, Zambucky?”

He asks as Natasha snickers.

”What?”

Barnes asks, frowning in confusion. He hadn't been paying any attention to Tony, while was unusual, so there was probably murder on his mind after all (it was easier to be amused by the whole thing with somebody else in the room. It was nice to have Natasha at his back again, even if he still
doesn’t trust her to be fully behind him).

“Zambucky, like a Zambonie? Fun Canadian machines for smoothing ice? Too smooth for you, apparently.”

He teases.

"I’m not angry,"

Barnes mumbles, covering his face with his hand and ignoring Tony’s quality pun (he tried to get Natasha to high five him but she turned her nose up, the traitor),

“I’m just jealous.”

There’s a pause while Tony takes that in and finds his internal screaming is a little quieter than usual. Present, but not deafening. Maybe because Barnes hadn’t beaten anybody bloody lately or destroyed robots and presented him with their sad mangled corpses to express said jealousy (he kept waiting for Barnes to stop being...weird with respect to him. Maybe this was 5% progress?).

"I mean-"

Barnes said, swiping his hand off his face and staring at Tony with wide (suspiciously 'butter wouldn't melt in my mouth') eyes,

“I used to love sci-fi and all that junk, but I don’t get science nowadays. Too much has changed to learn it all again."

Tony squints at him.

“You want to learn science.”

He says slowly like he’s trying to make sure he’s got this right (he knows Barnes is bullshitting him at least a little, but maybe this could be a fun test. Barnes wanted to say he was into Tony's interests? Then he could suffer while drowning in them).

"Well, uh..."

Barnes is actually getting redder,

“Mechanics really. I couldn’t care less about chemistry or biology, but I always loved getting my hands dirty.”

Barnes wiggles his fingers,

“Hand dirty, I guess.”

Tony snorts (HE doesn’t ignore perfectly good puns) and Barnes lights up eagerly (Tony was taking back the generous 5% he’d given him. It was at like...2% now). He’s still flushed and one-armed and ridiculous, so Tony can’t help but have that snort evolve into a full on guffaw (Barnes is delighted. Tony finds it hard to look away - he looked every inch a man in his mid-20s when he wasn’t miserable or murderous. Maybe Tony should boost him back to 5%).

"Mechanics is easy.”
Tony tells him,

“Friday has access to thousands of textbooks and other resources. She could teach you all the latest and greatest if you ask politely enough.”

A complicated expression flits over Barnes’ face (see! He was at least a little full of shit) and Natasha punches him hard in the chest. He winces, mumbling,

“I wasn’t doing anything, Natalia.”

Pan bounces up onto his lap and takes a swipe at Natasha, drawing a smirk out of Barnes and an eye roll out of Tony (all of his AIs were attention whores).

Speaking of which, pink light sparks beneath his hand, Friday ‘tapping’ his skin at the same time she tapped at his mind. He feels a little thrill - her interest in having physical manifestations was fascinating and satisfied some deeper need for connection on Tony's part (JARVIS had never been interested in having a physical form. Then again, he’d been a house essentially for ages and totally formless before that. Friday had been born into the suit...).

”Should I create a course for him, Boss? Or do you want to curate it yourself? I was planning to cram him with at least one undergraduate degree's worth...”

Friday asks him...huh, in his head. That was a little too uncanny valley for him right now. He flipped his hand over the barely there projection of her's and signed quickly,

“Yes, go ahead. Trust you.”

She signed back, only nudging at his nerves now instead of his mind, testing his boundaries like any good Stark would (he could feel her preening at that and stroked over her 'skin' indulgently),

“I'm going to make it difficult. I'm going to kick-“

He quickly signs,

“Don’t you dare.”

His mouth twisting as he suppressed a smile. Then, he realized the workshop had gone quiet.

”I'm teaching Friday some new protocols, sorry.”

He apologizes, feeling a slight sting of disappointment as Friday’s hand and presence disappeared from his body. Barnes was leaning forward, way forward into his space, and Tony was feeling a little lonely (he missed JARVIS fiercely every time him and Friday interacted in such a close level)...for a second, it almost felt like Barnes was taking advantage of that (like he saw the vulnerability and pressed forward immediately) The rush of (irrational, get it together, Tony) anger that quickly followed and dissipated was enough to knock his previous near-friendliness out of him (negative 5%. That’s where Barnes was sitting now).

Tony rolled his stool across the room to another workbench.

“That’s all for today.”

He says, tossing a pen at Natasha,
“I have actual work to do that requires you two not gossiping like old maids. Go on, shoo.”

”Are you...”

Bucky starts in a concerned tone, then seemingly changes his mind (wise man),

“When do you need me here next?”

Tony watches him through Friday's cameras while his body focuses on the bench in front of him, opening new project files and beginning to mess with them. Barnes is creeping forward almost imperceptibly (negative 10%). If it weren’t for Natasha’s obvious tracking of him and the steady increase of disapproval in her body language, Tony wouldn’t have noticed at all (damn all of these stealthy assassin types).

”Not until the new mooring is built, so not for awhile. Don’t know how long, don’t particularly care.”

It’s sharp, but the second he gives Barnes an inch he takes a mile. If he even let himself think that Barnes was a decent guy he was pretty sure he’d find the guy in his room (or in his bed).

Barnes takes the reprimand well. He’s learned not to apologize at long last, instead just packing up his stuff and getting gone, not even shooting Tony puppy dog eyes behind his back (don’t think that Barnes is alright, Tony. Remember the whole ‘will find him in your room’ thing. Tony didn't want the Winter Soldier sleeping under his bed like the boogeyman).

"He's trying his best."

Natasha says, startling Tony (he had just assumed she’d leave, too).

“I know.”

Tony grumbles, wondering if she’d been holding out on a lecture the entire time before promptly scrapping the idea (this was Natasha, queen of murdering unwanted suitors).

"His best isn’t good enough, but it’s something, isn’t it?"

She asks. He likes that she’s always blatant with her fishing with him. Maybe because she knows he’d catch the more subtle stuff too and that he’d go way further out of his way to fuck her over than if he saw her putting in actual effort. Couldn’t resist a challenge and all that.

"It might be."

Tony says. He spins a screwdriver on his thumb and forefinger, trying to relax as it spun on lazy circles.

“He’s the Winter Soldier. I’m sure his best will get better.”

Natasha approaches him, plucking the screwdriver from his hand and placing it flat on the workbench.

“As long as somebody is guiding him? Maybe.”
There’s a good inch of space between them, but from Natasha it might as well be a hug. Tony breathes deep and consciously unwinds the knots in his neck and shoulders.

"It’s not my job to guide him."

He says and, ah, that was what she was aiming for wasn’t it. Tony flicks her knee and she allows it (because there’s no way he was going to hit her without her allowing it).

“That’s not what this thing with the shoulder is. Not exactly.”

He grumbles under his breath and fishes around for something else to fidget with since Natasha stole his screwdriver. He manages to nab a tiny magnet to play with and Natasha frowns at him. Tony goes right back to talking,

"Machines? I fix those. People? I try to give them a chance to fix themselves. Sometimes I interfere and fuck it all up, but hey, I’ve picked up a few things after our last little spat.”

The magnet spins more and more quickly and he shifts the nanobots around in his fingers for fun.

"I’m fixing the machine. If it gets Barnes to a place where he’s tolerable, well, I won’t look a gift stalker in the mouth."

He finishes, shrugging nonchalantly. Natasha spins the screwdriver on the bench and Tony shoots the magnet over to it. It sticks perfectly to the head (score!) and Natasha high fives him at last.

Then she curls her fingers around his.

"I’ve known you too long to actually believe that."

She says, which is insulting but comes out fond so he’ll allow it,

"But it’s your call and I’m going to back it. I’m Team Iron Man now."

She releases him and gets an awkward little grin on her face,

“I’ve got the pins for it and everything.”

"There are pins?!”

Tony cries, but Natasha raises a razor sharp eyebrow at him and he just knows he won’t get any other information out of her (and that he probably won’t be able to figure out exactly which ones she has, damn it).

"This is bullying."

He mumbles, sinking his head into his arms. She snorts, pats his hair, and leaves him alone with all of his merchandising thoughts (and one annoyingly persistent one in particular: would Barnes wear a Team Iron Man pin? Team Cap? Both? He’d have to check internet forums now. He hated checking internet forums).

Chapter End Notes
Tony: I'd bang anyone who talked science at me, actually.
Bucky: *clenches fist*
Bucky: I just...love learning so much.
Natasha: Bucky, no.
Tony: This fool is going to try impressing me, an actual genius, with rudimentary science?
Natasha: Haha, yeah. There's no way he'll be able to learn enough to-
Tony: I'm going to teach him SO HARD
Natasha: Tony, no.

Tony, you fool, you foolish fool! You are green lighting Bucky so hard right now and you don't even know it. Why are you like this.
Chapter Summary

Two drama queens meet in the dead of night to recite Milton at one another.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony doesn’t see Barnes much while he works on the new shoulder mooring. Instead he surrounds himself with a flock of science children, Helen Cho, a curious Vision, an ever patient Rhodey, and princess Shuri on conference call.

Just like that, he’s finally found a way to invite his important people into the new lab. Tony never ceased to be amazed by how...easy some things are (when he doesn't have to set up an entire press conference to make a point, or throw a party, or build a tower.).

He kind of never wants them to leave if he’s being honest (and then Peter gets peanut butter all over his best set of allan keys, the little-).

It’s good. It’s good in a way he's still trying to get used to. Lows feel more like home nowadays than highs, so creating something for someone else with someone else is...

Tony keeps showing up to Avengers drills with a secretive little smile on his face. He even runs two exercises with them, steering extremely clear of both Steve and Barnes in the field because more and more often that is inciting a big snarl of weird emotions that are almost as bad as the panic attacks (Steve doesn’t look so guilty anymore. He doesn’t look angry or depressed or a half dozen other toxic emotions. He looks lost, like he had on the helicarrier the first time they met, like he had when Aunt Peggy died...it makes something in Tony a little bit sad. He doesn’t have the heart to rip it out by the roots like anything else he ever felt for Steve. Inevitably from there his thoughts would stray to Barnes. And how Barnes looked happy that he was happy. And how Barnes was leaving him alone even though he had an excuse to pester him. How he watched over Tony's back but still watched over Steve’s too, a steady presence that seemed to be helping Steve rebuild himself one sad muscle at a time).

The drills aren't great, but they let Tony see Rhodey eying him every time he flies by in a speculative way. Tony just knows he’ll be back on the field soon, too. There’s impatience in his gaze and an antsy jostle to his leg (he knows his Cabbage Patch Kid - he wanted to soar and nothing, nothing, would hold him back for much longer).

Tony wishes he could impulsively swipe Rhodey and draw him into the sky, but he doesn’t want to trigger a panic attack. Instead he just salutes, sky-writing a heart for his Sugar Cube (Barnes chuckles and nudges Steve, who gets this tiny little smile on his face, though it’s mostly hidden behind his depression beard that Tony was itching to make fun of. That would mean talking to Steve, though. He’d been avoiding that since game day).

Time passes quicker than he had thought it would. Tony feels exceptionally old these days (he's thankful that he has this even when he can't have his salt and pepper hair and wrinkles back), where
a week was blink and you'll miss it.

Once the mooring is being put into production for some beta testing, Tony wanders around the compound getting his kicks where he can (he helps RiRi dunk Peter in the pool, helps Kamala and Donny set up a monolith house of cards, calls Harley and introduces him to Shuri, then laughs at how absolutely tongue tied he gets in front of royalty. Then he calls T'Challa, changing his ringtone to 'What's Up Pussycat' on the very reliable information that he is in a meeting with Nakia - the woman he was most definitely in love with. Shuri calls him, changing his ringtone to fucking 'Careless Whisper', then bursts into a fit of laughter as she hangs up on him. T'Challa doesn’t even yell at him - he just stares despairingly into the void over videochat. Tony can hear a woman singing 'What's Up Pussycat' in the background).

He even gets to oversee Jessica and Pepper's first meeting - he hangs around for a ridiculously long time in the kitchen just to catch Jess and keep her there for when Pepper was going to drop off some contracts.

It's hate at first sight. It's hilarious. Jess takes one look at Pepper's towering heels and pressed suit and perfect hair, and bristles. Pepper sees Jess, muddy shoes up on the counter and hand tucked into Tony's back pocket, and smiles the kind of customer service smile that usually makes Tony fear for his life (there were reasons he couldn't enter Starbucks).

They make a long series of incredibly catty comments at each other in what is essentially lawyer-ese and then simultaneously decide to ignore each other, calling out to him in the exact same subtly wheedling tone ('make her leave' written all over it).

They both look offended. He laughs and they look more offended, though there’s a fond slant to Pepper's tightly pursed lips and Jess hasn’t hurled him through a window, so he was pretty sure they were alright.

"Life’s always better with you around, Pep In My Step."

He says, kissing the crows feet at the corners of her eyes when she hugs him goodbye.

“Let's go flying again sometime,

She whispers in his ear, “

"I'll show Ms Rough N Ready that I've got suits other than this one."

Jess whispers,

“Preppy Peppy."

Under her breath in a mocking sing-song tone and Pepper's eye twitches. It’s better than Tony could’ve ever imagined.

Finally, Tony has no more time to waste and no more distractions. He has a complex titanium alloy shoulder for Barnes that was partially integrated with some really cool bone, cartilage, and gold blend Shuri and Helen had fuss over for three days straight. The shoulder is gorgeous, weighted somewhat strangely to redistribute and support the mass of metal lining Barnes’ left ribs, cervical, and lumbar spine once it was attached. The load-bearing capabilities were fascinating - Tony was considering integrating Helen and Shuri’s Au-steo ('Get it? Au for gold, osteo like bone? Cmon!') into his undersuit.
It was perfect...it wouldn’t even have any of the heat distribution issues the old set-up had to have had (how Barnes didn't get frostbite was beyond him. Unless, of course, Barnes did get frostbite. Constantly).

Now Tony just had to get surgeons to install it.

Which would require knocking Barnes out on a surgeon's table...something that definitely hadn’t happened to him since that arm was installed (or other invasive surgeries were done - who knew what Hydra got up to. Not Tony, and he’d like to keep it that way).

He had thought this part would be simple. Barnes had agreed to the whole process. Tony didn’t need to check in with him. He didn't. Really.

Tony repeats this to Rhodey, who shrugs. Rhodey doesn’t care about Barnes - probably thinks if Barnes agreed to something he shouldn’t have, he deserves whatever he’s gonna get (Rhodey rolls his eyes when Tony voices that thought but doesn't refute it).

Tony repeats himself to Jess, too. She doesn’t even look up from her cereal.

“Barnes can handle anything that gets thrown at him...literally. I’ve thrown things at him. The man is a cockroach.”

She mumbles around a full mouth of Count Chocula, scowling and chewing viciously. Her and Barnes still had some kind of extreme rivalry going on, though it was carefully hidden from Tony and Carol's eyes. He was pretty sure they’d fought more times and just asked Friday not to mention it to him (she would if he asked, but he was still trying to learn to respect privacy a bit better in the compound).

Tony even runs off to Carol to tell her exactly how NOT concerned he is. Unlike everyone else, she doesn’t humor him for a single second.

“You’re right to be worried.”

She says flatly,

“Barnes is a dumbass. He’d probably agree to anything you said without thinking about it.”

When Tony looked promptly horrified, she clasped his elbow,

“That’s his fault, and I’m here to look out for him. He also has other people watching over him, Tony. I can ask him about the whole procedure and make sure everything is fine.”

Carol is a gift and Tony hasn't been this proud of his hiring decisions since Pepper. She sends him an all-clear message through Friday later the same day.

Still...

Tony is...twitchy. People have asked Barnes if this ok. He’s being modified with his own consent. This procedure would ultimately result in him hurting less, probably being a little less weird and hopefully a little more self preserving, maybe prepare him for active duty (Tony could read the writing on the wall. The Avengers integrated team was much more functional now, game day creating a huge shift along with his depressive episode afterwards. He knew what the Accords council would want).
But Barnes hadn’t confirmed that with Tony. With somebody who understood. With the person he had entrusted with the shoulder’s creation.

Tony takes himself out on a flight with Pepper and RiRi when he finally becomes too twitchy to work. He’s a little jealous - Iron Heart (which is how she’d introduced herself to Pepper - adorable) loved ‘Rescue’ as much as she loved War Machine. She kept flitting around Pepper as she flew, showing off all kinds of intricate patterns as she chattered about Pepper’s accomplishments in Stark Industries, all the while calling Tony an anti-social old man (true in many aspects, but still rude).

The background noise is good for him, as is Rhodey's jealous bitching over the coms and Friday’s droll responses. It lets him think without being alone (he hates being alone nowadays...he wasn't sure what he was going to do when being alone becomes the default again).

He's like a dog with a bone, chewing at it and chewing at it even though there wasn’t anything to be gained.

How much of Barnes’ life had been essentially decided for him? He trailed after Steve through his whole life, still dedicated more than half his time and resources to checking in on him (Friday was filthy gossip and so was Natasha. Besides, Tony had eyes). Barnes did things for other people (not for himself).

Tony didn’t want to be another person Barnes did things for. Not like this. He knew this wasn’t a guilt thing or a revenge thing or ANYTHING but...

In his mind’s eye, the shoulder shone gold and black with the slightest blue sheen (Tony gazed at the repulsers on his palm, glowing with the same blue light that followed him everywhere these days, that represented his change into what and who he was today. Proof that Tony Stark has a heart-).

"Uuuuggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,"

Tony groans. Everybody stops chattering and he sighs to himself,

“If I ask Barnes in person if he’s alright with getting the new shoulder installed and explain the entire thing to him personally, am I being stupid? Is this a bad idea? It feels like a bad idea and I would know-“

RiRi answers him lightning quick, doing a barrel roll and flipping to sail underneath him, patting his armored foot,

"Why wouldn’t you tell him in person? He wants to hear it from you. I tap into the Avengers coms sometimes-“

“RiRi!”

He snaps.

"And so does Peter-“

“Peter!?!?”

“And Barnes talks about things you’ve done with the design. Friday has used the shoulder schematics to teach him mechanics I think...?”

“FRIDAY!!!!!"
Tony screams, exasperated with his entire team of goddamn gossips.

“But he wants to hear your take on it. Never shuts up about how great it is that you worked with a bunch of people, though you didn’t work with ME-“

RiRi complains and Tony protests,

“You said it was boring! You said you didn’t even like Barnes! You threatened to make it shoot confetti!”

Rhodey snorts over the line and Tony hisses,

“Don’t you dare encourage this.”

While Pepper says,

“God, here comes the old married couple routine.”

RiRi goes on anyway,

“Plus you guys got that whole vibe going on where you talk in your own little world and Barnes goes all squishy and weird.”

Tony makes a noise like he’s dying. Rhodey makes the exact same one. Pepper squeaks.

"He’d probably be more comfortable-“

Rhodey butts in with,

“Ok, I’m putting a stop to this. RiRi, darling, I know you’re trying to help, but Tony is going to feel like he’s obligated to talk to Barnes if you keep that train of thought going. They don’t really get along, so that would make Tony uncomfortable.”

Tony makes another dying man noise. This was the most embarrassing day of his - ok, no, it really wasn’t (he could think of many worse ones, but this still ranked at least a seven out of ten).

"Is it one-sided then?"

RiRi asks because she had the EQ of a rock sometimes,

“Cause I know Tony hated him and I hated him too, but Barnes really likes him-“

"If somebody likes you, do you have to like them back?"

Rhodey asks. RiRi fumbles through an awkward,

“No?"

And Rhodey presses her with,

“If somebody is nice to you, do you have to like them?”
RiRi sounds thoroughly embarrassed when she whispers,

“Oh. No. Uh, sorry Tony.”

Tony opens up a private line with her, letting her see his face. He smiled softly at her (Rhodey kept calling it his grandpa face. Doting old grandpa. He was just mad Tony didn’t have wrinkles anymore),

’It’s alright, RiRi. I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t considering talking to him, remember? Barnes is...alright. I guess.”

She eyes him suspiciously,

“You aren’t just saying that because you feel bad for me?”

Tony winces because uh...yes, a little bit? But he also, just a smidgen, thought that Barnes wasn’t the worst person in the compound (that went to Wanda, hands down, whatever she was currently doing). So...

"Of course not."

He says. RiRi believes him (she was terrible with people, by Einstein) and he goes back on their shared com.

“Now that that’s resolved, I’ve got to see a man about some metal. Women, let’s turn this ship around!”

Groaning echoed all around him, but his girls were still at his back. All was as it should be.

________

Tony shows up at Bucky’s door in his (incredibly tight) flight suit in the middle of the night. It makes Bucky’s brain completely quit on him. It doesn’t come back properly either - he’s had more than a few fantasies that started like this and honestly, he’s had trouble with hallucinations before, so his brain is absolutely losing its shit (Tony is here, Tony is here and he's all tousled by flying, and he's here).

Tony makes a weird face (probably regret about coming here) when Bucky just stares at him like a moron for a few minutes longer than was socially appropriate (a single minute was probably weird in hindsight, but once Bucky got to staring, he had trouble shaking it. He was probably getting the murder face again, too. He really needed to straighten that out. Why hadn’t therapy fixed his face?).

"Uh..."

Bucky says, pulling his door open wider and gesturing with his foot at the coffee table,

“Come in...?”

Tony pushes past him and Bucky inhales deeply like a creep. The world's biggest creep. Tony smelled good - like ozone and salt and a heady amount of something good. He'd been flying.
Bucky leans in when Tony passes him (something good), before titling back so abruptly he cracks his head against the door (stop being weird, damn it!). Tony looks somewhat amused, though the expression comes to his face reluctantly. Was injuring himself charming? Because Bucky...shouldn’t do that. Because that was bad. And weird. And Steve would be upset with him even more than he had seemed to be lately.

Tony runs his hand over the coffee table and then folds his legs into the depression in the floor. The one he built. For Bucky. Personally.

Bucky swallows and tries to shake the tunnel vision he was rapidly developing - he had no idea having Tony in his personal space would make him (want him to never leave, make him want to lock the door, brew the man some of that seduction coffee and dress him in his clothes and mark him with his scent-) so possessive.

Speaking of Tony, he was looking at Bucky expectantly. Right, right, he was still holding the door open. He was also wearing Captain America pajama pants and a tank top emblazoned with Excalibur (because he’d been reading Arthurian legends, hoping Tony would open another path of communication between them like before and also because they were surprisingly enjoyable and Friday thought it was funny).

”Are you going to close the door, Barnes? Or do I have to do it for you?”

There was a definite amused tilt to Tony’s mouth now. The corners of his eyes crinkled and Bucky was strongly reminded of how the man had looked with wrinkles - age had suited Tony (but he had to go and become something more, just like Bucky and Steve. The world had to go and take away his age and his laugh lines and the signs that he had lived).

”Yeah, I was just...”

Bucky trails off. He doesn’t have an excuse and saying ‘taking you in and memorizing this image forever’ is definitely the kind of thing Jessica Jones would swoop in here and murder him for saying. He suspected that Matt Murdock sometimes used his superior hearing to eavesdrop on the awkward shit Bucky said about Tony (he had heard Daredevil snickering to himself more than once. He just knew that man was up to something, even if he couldn’t prove it).

Bucky shuts the door and nearly locks it before hurriedly concealing the motion by tapping his door a few times nervously.

Tony watches the motion shrewdly, then deliberately lifts his hand to his chest and taps the same rhythm. Bucky feels himself relaxing immediately, thinking of the same motion repeated by his therapist on a regular basis. This was better than his therapist’s tapping, though - a little light sparks just underneath Tony’s undersuit, lulling Bucky further into calm.

”Huh, that really does get you.”

Tony observes. Bucky tenses again, but the tapping keeps up, the light rippling, and Bucky can’t help but imagine what it must look like on Tony’s skin (sunbeams breaking through the surface of the Pontomac, swaying with the waves and tinted blue, guiding him to a completely new life on the run as he hauled Steve to safety).

Bucky sits down hard at the coffee table, his whole body sagging against it as he keeps his eyes on Tony's fingers (it was weird, almost having permission to stare. It made him feel like he was breaking some kind of cardinal rule).
"My therapist does it sometimes."

He tells Tony, nodding vaguely to his moving hand,

"He's missing a few fingers. Takes the ones he has left and taps them against his heart. He calls it his 'connection'."

Tony's fingers pause. Bucky keeps watching them and Tony keeps watching Bucky for one heart-stopping moment, and then they resume.

"A connection?"

Tony asks, fingers drumming more quickly, a pattern in Morse, H-A-R-L-E-Y,

"I can see that. A connection."

Bucky hums, eyes going half-lidded. His room is warm and Tony smells nice. Tony is nice, now that he's not trying his best to be prickly. Bucky rarely relaxed, was rarely aware of how little he relaxed, but now his muscles felt heavy and something like euphoria curled itself into his chest.

The Morse changed; I-L-L-U-M-I-N-A-T-E. Bucky taps it back onto the table and Tony blinks at him in confusion until their tapping syncs up. It feels a little like dancing with Natalia, would feel more like it if he could intertwine his fingers with Tony's...

"You look..."

Tony squints at him and Bucky hides a dopey grin by tucking his face into his arm, curling into the table,

"How stressed out are you usually? We have anxiety medication outfitted for somebody of your constitution-"

Bucky snorts against his own skin,

"Gotta learn t' handle it wit'out drugs. Dunno when those'll get taken away. Dunno wha' the serum would do t' it if I got hurt or it got juiced up. Short-term only."

That was...much more honest than he had meant to be. When Steve and Sam had brought it up, he'd just said no. He frowned.

Tony frowned too.

"I'm gonna quit it with the tapping, ok Barnes?"

Bucky mumbled a drawn out,

"Noooooo."

But Tony did it anyway.

"You're on a bit of an...endorphin high."

Tony said carefully,
“Please stop getting high around me, Barnes. It’s disconcerting when I’m already worried about your state of mind and ability to consent to things.”

”Can’t help it,”

Bucky said, propping his chin up on his hand and grinning at Tony,

“You're intoxicatin' .”

Surprisingly, Tony's cheeks coloured and he glanced away, coughing awkwardly into his hand.

“I'm going to uh...”

Tony looked around for something to do,

“Brew some tea. Yeah.”

"I’ve only got coffee grounds.”

Bucky says, because what the Hell, he wanted some seduction coffee. Tony's face coloured further and he hurried off to the kitchenette.

The whole coffee process was a lot louder and longer than it probably should’ve taken. He heard Tony drop things a few times while muttering curses. It gave him enough time to even out, though - he really needed to discuss his anxiety with his therapist if it had actually gotten this bad physically. The old man had told Bucky it was alright if he was unaware of his own tension, said it was natural to smooth it out in order to go about his daily life, but again Tony added a whole new layer of complications to Bucky’s treatment (so did Steve and Tasha, but at least they were aware of it. They could work together on the things Bucky got stuck on. He couldn’t work with Tony, though.

Ugh, safety on, Barnes. Cmon, cmon).

Unconsciously, He was drumming Tony's Morse into the table. I-L-L-U-M-I-N-A-T-E. It drained the tension from his hand, then from his arm, and finally from his traps and neck. Huh...maybe he should try some self-soothing techniques outside of the guns and exercise.

"Coffee.”

Tony abruptly said, thunking a huge mug of pitch black brew onto the table. Then his hands flicked out, plopping a lumpily-shaped cube of spiced sugar into the coffee (which smelled dark and rich and heavy like the drink T’Challa sometimes had at his desk - was this Wakandan coffee? One of Bucky's gifts? Holy shit, yes!) and a long piece of orange rind rolled in crushed clove.

Bucky could get behind the concept of seduction coffee if this is what it looked like.

“'You don’t have the right kind of cream or spices, but I made do.”

Tony said, stirring his own coffee diluted with milk (it had a surprisingly reddish colour to it. Exactly which spices had Tony put in the sugar? Bucky’s nose was good, but he didn’t recognize half the things Natasha had loaded into his spice cabinet).

Tony knocked back a swig and closed his eyes. Pink light, barely visible to Bucky, brushed lightly against his shoulder and prompted Tony to draw a deep breath (Friday...? Was she checking in on...?)
Tony? That was incredibly adorable. Bucky was going to have a heart attack).

"So,"

Tony said, clutching his mug like a lifeline,

"I wanted to ask you personally about your shoulder installation."

Bucky was confused,

"I already agreed to it. I told Colonel Danvers-"

Tony waves him off,

"I know,"

He says, then rubs a hand vigorously over his mouth, looking away,

"I know."

He says more softly,

"I wanted to explain the process myself though. Make sure you understood. Make sure you actually consented to this instead of just agreeing for whatever reason."

A spark of annoyance settle in Bucky's veins. He scowled,

"I wouldn’t say yes if I didn’t want the upgrade."

He says,

"I don’t want anything Hydra built inside of me. I would never let anybody touch my fucking missing limb again if I didn’t want them to - I’d kill them first. I’m not a pushover, Stark."

He takes a swig of his coffee, the sweet taste running at odds with his irritation (sure he had considered doing Tony some favours, moving at his side in the heat of battle, being aimed at an enemy, but-),

"You’re not my fucking handler. Nobody is. I’m not - I don’t do that anymore."

"There’re other ways to coerce a person."

Tony returns just as sharply and Bucky growls (the spark turning into a flame),

"I am a trained agent! I can recognize coercion! I even have a therapist to help me recognize coercion - this is, fuck, this is so patronizing."

Tony shoved back from the table, pacing the room,

"Are you trained to recognize coercion that is good for you? Is your therapist??"

"I’m not following."

Bucky says,
"You recommended this in the first place. This is **good** for me. What’s your problem?"

Bucky was tempted to leap to his feet and get in Tony's face (**safety on**) over how ridiculous he was being (**was this some kind of test?**).

"Exactly! **I** recommended this! It **is** good for you!"

Tony cries out, like that’s a problem,

"It wasn’t YOUR idea. It’s YOUR body. Do you WANT to change it?"

"It’s **already** been changed!"

Bucky snarls, clasping his good hand over his shoulder and glaring at the back of Tony's head as the man turned around.

"So was mine!"

Tony yells, turning on his heel and glaring at Bucky with viciously glowing blue eyes,

“Mine was changed and I changed it more because it was GOOD for me, but it didn’t feel right! It didn’t feel good! I did it because I had to - Christ, Barnes, I’m trying to give you a **choice**!"

It took a second for that to sink in, but when it did Bucky grabbed his mug and drained it dry, the sweetness flowing down his throat and easing the bitterness he felt. Tony wasn’t testing him. He wasn’t saying Bucky couldn’t make his own choices. He just wanted to make sure Bucky knew what the choice he was making really was (**he thought about Tony becoming something more and less with a sinking feeling in his chest. Did Tony ever apply that freedom of choice to himself? Was it any different because it happened by his own hand?**).

"Don’t look at me like that."

Tony snapped, stiff-backed and as far away from Bucky as his tiny apartment would allow.

Bucky sighed and ducked his head. He waited and eventually he could hear Tony head towards him on unsure feet.

"I know you want to install the shoulder."

Tony said, standing at the head of the table instead of sitting,

“I’m just...not any good at this. I needed to hear you say it. For myself, uh...”

He bent and picked up his coffee. He drummed his fingers against the side before forcing himself to stop with a grimace.

"And I wanted to let you know we don’t need to do it right away. You can pick your own surgeon. Pick the way you want to do the surgery without any outside influence. You can back out at any time."

Tony released a shaky breath,
“You can do whatever you want and I won’t mind. We worked on the shoulder but you don’t have to take it. Or you don’t have to take it right now.”

Bucky listened to him carry the mug over to Bucky’s sink and rinse it out. It was a surprisingly domestic gesture for a man who’d been raised with housekeepers and maids (though there were rumors about the old butler and Bucky remembered how Steve had described Friday to him: ‘just like Jarvis.’).

“I’m gonna...I’m just gonna go. Sorry, Barnes.”

He mutters, just loud enough for Bucky to pick up.

“Tony,”

He calls out, finally really looking at Tony and taking in the nervous set to his shoulders, the distressed tremble of his left hand,

“I’m sorry, too. You-“

He pauses, not sure how to get the words out in a way Tony would understand,

“It’s hard for me, too. Seeing you do things I did. Becoming...”

“Something else.”

Tony whispers, clenching his left fist. The tremors stopped.

“I can’t stand being near Natasha sometimes. Or Steve.”

Bucky says,

“Because we’re...it’s too close. Parts of our lives are too similar and I just, I want them to feel better and I just-“

”Can’t. Can’t change things for them. Can’t change things for you.”

Tony is drawing closer, still nervous, but his focus is entirely on Bucky. It’s exhilarating, but the reason behind it makes Bucky feel sick. Neither of them were really alright (not that Bucky had any illusions about himself, but Tony talked a big game. He seemed like he could be normal given enough time).

”Yeah.”

He says, voice rough,

“There’s all this...”

He gestures at himself (all man and machine and weapon) with a self-deprecating smile,

“There’s too much going on inside of me. I want feel like one thing instead of - yeah. To just...take all those things I can’t control, the things that are too much, the things I’m not supposed to have, and consume them.”
Tony shivered, but his eyes were dark with understanding.

“I feel empty and I take and take and take until I fill the hole. You create instead. Inventions, problems, fixes...I get it.”

Bucky finishes, looking at Tony pleadingly (’Understand me’ he nearly begged, ’Tell me this isn’t wrong’).

Tony steps up next to Bucky and Bucky looks up at him from the floor (safety on, Sergeant Barnes).

“Jessica thinks I’m going to consume you, too. You’re right to be worried.”

Bucky tells him despite the roiling anxiety in his stomach. The blue glow of Tony’s eyes intensifies. It snakes down through his veins, coalescing in the centre of his hand as gold from the suit flowed between streams of light (the sun breaking through the waves in the Potomac).

”I would kill you before you could even try.”

Tony says, cold violence curling around him like the metal of his suit. Insidious interest sits heavy in Bucky’s chest. He hates himself for wanting this (Tony here in his room, furious and strong and still somehow so soft, placing all of his attention on Bucky-).

”I know.”

He tells Tony, breathless and wishing he wasn’t. The metal slips away as Tony kneels. Tony reaches out, face cold but eyes soft, running one hand through Bucky’s hair. Bucky’s eyes slip shut and his head falls forward, pressing into Tony’s palm. It was probably fucked up to say he’d never felt something so good before (his heart felt fit to burst, fuck, what was this).

”What is dark within me,”

Tony says in a shaking voice, his hand smoothing down the side of Bucky’s face to cup his cheek (leaving a blazing trail in its wake, Bucky's nerves sparking into awareness),

“Illuminate.”

He drums the pattern on Bucky’s cheek. Bucky’s breath catches. He wants to see Tony’s face, but he can’t quite bring himself to open his eyes (to do anything that might end this. Please, don’t just be another dream).

”Take care of yourself, Frosty.”

Tony says, slipping away. Bucky keeps his eyes closed, breathing deep (pulling something good into his lungs and trying to keep it there as close to his heart as he dared), as Tony continues,

”Send me a date for the surgery and your stipulations. You can uh...”

Bucky hears his hand tap against the wood of Bucky’s door. I-L-L-U-M-I-N-A-T-E.

“You can talk to me.”

Tony says, leaving all in a rush (taking all this new heat and light in Bucky’s world with him).
His scent hangs around Bucky’s room for hours afterwards.

*(Jessica Jones was right. Bucky had spotted the brightest thing in the room and dragged it into his orbit)*

*(He didn’t regret it)*

*(He wanted more)*

*(Safety on, Sergeant Barnes. Illuminate)*

Chapter End Notes

**Tony:** I'm not worried about Barnes.
**Tony:** But if he is even slightly uncomfortable, I will fling myself off a cliff.
**Bucky:** Please don’t do that.
**Tony:** Woah, Barnes, coOL it DoWN witH THE fEeLinGs, OK!?
**Rhodey:** ...Tony
**Tony:** It’s not like me touching your face and giving you my personal mantra means anything!
**Tony:** I touch faces All ThE TIme oK!? It’S NorMAL!

**Bucky:** :

**Rhodey:** Tony don’t give in. I know he has a cute face, but-
**Bucky:** :(;

**Rhodey:** Tony, please, you're stronger than this-
**Bucky:** :((

**Rhodey:** If you give him what he wants, he will never stop coming back-
**Bucky:** :(((

**Tony:** *pets Bucky’s face lovingly*

**Rhodey:** ...Why do I even bother
Wednesday

Chapter Summary

The Avengers go Mean Girls and Tony winds up in Jessica's Burn Book.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before the surgery, Bucky does wind up talking to his therapist and several surgeons. They are concerned for him and it chafes, but ultimately it helps him be...sure. That this is what he should do.

It was such a small thing, the removal of pain. Pain he had lived with for longer than he'd lived without it. But it felt monumentous. Not only was the shoulder of Tony's design (a labour of love, Tony's eyes sparkling in the light of all his projections, a pink cast sliding over his skin as Friday put in her two cents), but now Bucky had a hand in actually placing it in his body.

It was his. It was actually his.

He hadn't owned a single goddamn thing in decades.

Bucky trails the fingers of his only hand over puckers of scars that marked bullet wounds. A ripple of skin for acid or fire. Straight tight lines for knives. Ragged marks that he couldn't even remember getting (being dragged over ice? Falling from the train? Something else that the serum couldn't handle?).

They were all his.

This body was his. Not the Winter Soldier's, not Bucky Barnes’, but his.

He gets Steve to draw him. He’s been...distant for awhile (since a few weeks after starting therapy. Bucky's therapist looks displeased sometimes when he mentions Steve, but the man is a consummate professional. He won't say a word about why). Bucky knows he could figure out why if he really tried, but he thinks Steve deserves the privacy - room to grow without him butting in. The sketch is a peace offering across the no man's land growing between them.

It's weird to see himself through Steve’s eyes. The shoulder is swollen, more strained and scarred in Steve’s art than reality (it looks painful, a red-hot pain, instead of the distant ache he'd grown so accustomed to). His gaze is piercing, but not with icy violence. Steve has added an element to it like candle light that Bucky isn’t sure he actually possesses (the warmth there small and flickering, but warmth nonetheless).

His hand is somehow gentler than it should be. Steve draws it cast in light, carefully closed around something he’s keeping close to his chest (he swears he can see the impression of something glimmering through his skin. He hopes Steve doesn’t think that’s Bucky’s heart - some bright shimmering thing cradled in the only hand he has left. Bucky knows his heart is something much harder to look at, something he keeps crushed tightly in his fist for fear of losing it or having it exposed).
All his scars are stark white and untextured. They are startling against his skin, mapping out layer after layer of pain, crossing over one another, like they’ve deleted a part of Bucky entirely. They aren’t a black hole, though they are still a void.

The longer Bucky stares, the more nervous Steve gets.

“You wanted to know what you looked like before going under, so I tried to be more true to life than usual. Heavier on the realism, I guess? I don’t know if I got it right. There’re things that changed because I can't help a little surreal."

He says, wringing his hands in the hem of his shirt.

"It’s alright Stevie."

Bucky tells him, clasping his friend's shoulder firmly,

“This is exactly what I wanted. Jus’ strange seeing myself like this, that’s all.”

Steve smiles (tremulously at the edges like it always got when he had to remember Bucky wasn't Bucky anymore), and then flips open his sketchbook to put the paper back inside. Bucky sees the latest piece there - Tony leaning heavily on Colonel Rhodes, face slack in sleep. Colonel Rhodes is nearly featureless, as is the background (several smudges of graphite) but Tony is detailed in ballpoint pen (cerulean blue like the sky, his left hand...curled over his chest...cradling something just out of sight - Stevie, what are you doing?).

Steve's smile gets a little more strained as he snaps the sketch pad closed.

“You want me to come with you tomorrow?”

Steve asks and Bucky is helpless to do anything but nod. Steve’s his best friend. Always has been, always will be, no matter what came between them (even though a twisting in Bucky’s gut said he was gonna fight Steve on this one, that it would probably end in blood, because Bucky wasn’t willing to back down and he KNEW Steve. He was gonna hold Bucky’s goddamn hand through surgery and if he even looked at Tony sideways Bucky was going to slap him, anesthesia or no).

The surgery theatre was jam-packed. Tony had always taken Barnes for the kind of man who wanted less company, not more, so he’s a little confused at all the Avengers up in his space. Confused and irritated (mostly irritated, ugh, he was gonna break out in hives). He hadn’t bothered bringing his own posse along for this endeavour since he hadn’t wanted to overwhelm Barnes (and they had some...choice words on him going to Barnes' room awhile back. Namely 'Tony, hand to God, I am going to take you to see an exorcist' for some reason. Oh, there was also wordless screaming from Jess).

"You could’ve just asked him, Boss."

Friday signs (smugly. How was that even possible?) against his skin and he scowls at the nearest camera. He knows that.

Tony inches uncomfortably away from the Rogue Avengers as Natasha and Steve inch closer, bringing the rest with them like planets locked in each other’s orbits. Tony, honest to Tycho Brahe’s
extremely bad luck, considers inching his way out of the room entirely, but then he \textit{(unfortunately)} manages to move into a place where Barnes can spot him.

"Tony!"

He calls out, surging forward before his surgeon can grab his elbow. His IV yanks out and his expression immediately goes sheepish \textit{(Tony can’t resist the slightest twitch of his lips, the tiniest sign of amusement, feeding Barnes scraps when he knew that was a dangerous game, even when he didn’t mean to - ugh, it just made him think of Murakami: ‘you turn again, but the storm adjusts’).} The surgeon thwacks him over the head with their clipboard.

"Do that one more time, Mr Barnes,"

They threaten,

“And I will put a sock puppet in your shoulder socket instead of this beautiful piece of technology.”

Tony snorts. Of course Barnes picked the most abrasive surgeon available for this. Tony was beginning to sense a pattern in Barnes’ preferences \textit{('over and over again you play this out')}.

Barnes glances briefly at the surgeon, mouthing an apology, before his bright eyes landed on Tony again \textit{(Tony's heart gave an uncomfortable lurch in his chest. Barnes actually looked his age again, instead of looking like a dictionary figure for PTSD)}. His tone was wondering when he said,

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

Tony briefly considers being offended, but honestly he hadn’t wanted to be here. Surgery made him squeamish. But Barnes had taken advantage of his offer to talk to ask him to be here \textit{(and to pester him about books, but that was all. He had gotten his own copy of the Arthurian plants book, treated it like it was made of glass, and Tony had been tempted to give him a garden)}, so here he was. Honestly, Tony would’ve been more offended if Barnes HADN’T considered the possibility of Tony not showing up \textit{('like some ominous dance with death just before dawn')}. 

"You asked me to be here.”

He responds, flat as can be, and fiddles with his pink sunglasses \textit{(decked out in Pepper's colours, rose gold and burnished copper, just in case he needed a ‘Rescue’)}. Barnes’ expression softens when his gaze traces over them \textit{('this storm isn’t something that blew in from far away')}. 

"Hoping this’ll be rose coloured?"

He asks, biting his lip in an obvious attempt not to laugh. Tony huffs \textit{(he hasn’t been looking at world in shades of pink for years)}, and sweeps his shades off dramatically, tossing them to Barnes.

He caught them and nearly yanked the IV out again. His surgeon shot Tony a scathing look. They looked tempted to swat the glasses out of Barnes’ hand, but the Winter Soldier was more than capable of playing keepaway \textit{('something that has nothing to do with you')}.

Barnes slid them on \textit{(pink wasn’t really his colour, but it had a certain charm to it anyway. It made his creepy murder gaze far less ominous and matched the beginnings of the flush that was more and more common on his neck nowadays)}. 

"If anybody needs to see your surgery through rose-coloured glasses, it’s you, Buck-sicle.”
Tony said, turning his nose up in the air.

"Thank you, Tony."

Bu - Barnes said, quiet and somehow intimate from 20 feet away in a room full of people. It made Tony shift on his feet uncomfortably, jamming his hands in his pockets and wishing he had another set of sunglasses (‘the storm is you, something inside of you’).

Natasha’s fingers curl around his elbow (Tony's hopes of escape have officially dwindled to zero). Barnes eyes Natasha threateningly, however the impact is ruined by the pink lenses, making Natasha chuckle throatily and clutch Tony tighter. Before a fight can break out, Steve coughs awkwardly.

"I think we should all sit down."

He says, a strange set to his features (his jaw was angled like it always was when he was pissed, but everything else was all wrong, soft where it should be set in stone, coloured with misery where Tony expected fury).

All the available seating was fairly compact. There wasn’t much space within which Tony could isolate himself, causing his gaze to flick between the door and Steve (who was staring him down) repeatedly.

"You’re down here with me, Stevie."

Barnes calls out, something unyielding yet fond in his tone (a mother calling their child into line). Steve blinks and makes a confused sound in the back of his throat.

"Nobody is allowed on the floor during surgery, Buck."

He says, finally breaking eye contact with Tony to frown at Barnes like he should know this. Maybe he should - Steve had been a sickly kid. Presumably Barnes had watched or been around a surgery before (‘so all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm’).

Barnes grimaces, but it seems...playful,

“Need somebody to hold my hand.”

He says and wow, huh, that was definitely teasing (it was a good look on him. Suited him better than all those sharp edges, not that Tony cared-). A reluctant grin was working its way over Steve's face.

"If I knew you needed your hand held, I would’ve made sure we got a different surgeon. What’re we gonna do with this guy now? He ain’t ready to work on a baby."

The surgeon scowled and tossed a scalpel at Steve. An actual genuine scalpel. It was sharp. Tony was DEFINITELY beginning to sense a pattern in Barnes’ preferences (‘walk through it step by step’).

"Go on down, Steve."

Natasha said, pushing Tony into a seat and perching on his knees,

“There’s not enough room up here to begin with.”

Steve pointedly looks at the two or three empty chairs and then back at Natasha’s current position.
She tilts her chin up at him, a dangerous glimmer in her gaze. "There’s no room."

She says, and Tony is a weak weak man. He sees a reference and he has to make it. "You can’t sit with us."

He mumbles, trying to at least keep it mostly to himself, but Sam is abruptly doubled over and howling with laughter. He pats Tony's knee blindly, just barely missing Natasha (which was a good thing - he would've lost those fingers otherwise), and wheezes, "On Wednesdays we wear pink."

It was a Wednesday. Tony had worn pink.

Sam Wilson might just be a genius.

Tony gapes at him. "You’re alright, Wilson."

He concedes. It’s the nicest thing he’s said to any of the Rogues other than Natasha.

Sam smiles at him sunnily (radiating friendliness like he didn't have a bad bone in his body) and Tony can’t quite place when he’d ever REALLY talked to Sam Wilson. Falcon, sure, but Sam?

"You’re alright too, Stark. Or do you want me to call you Regina today?"

The sass has some of tension draining out of Tony, though not enough to fold forward like he wants to (Natasha would probably murder him if he disrupted her current placement. She was giving Barnes the dagger eyes and heaven forbid he interrupted).

"Make it a Wednesday thing and we’ll talk, Wilson."

He responds, tapping his fingers lightly along the arm of his chair. "I hope we do."

Sam says, a bit too sincerely for Tony's comfort, but then Barnes’ drill sergeant of a surgeon screams at all of them to shut up and he's distracted by the sound of Barnes' laughter (‘the storm is you’).

Bucky is groggy as all Hell for over an hour after coming to. Drugs usually left his body quickly, but whatever this was...was...strong, ugh. UGH.

He felt like over-cooked spaghetti by the time his mind was in working order. Steve was holding his hand, the goddamn punk, and all the Rogue Avengers were sitting by his bedside playing some card game.

Everything was tinted a soft shade of pink like he was in a movie. Bucky makes a soft confused noise and Steve chuckles (the sound not quite right, or was that the drugs talking?).
“The last time you woke up, you insisted on wearing Tony's sunglasses. Said you were gonna make sure his world was rose-coloured, then mumbled something about cats and pink ladies.”

Bucky groaned in embarrassment, however made no attempt to remove them. Tony had come to his surgery because HE asked him to. He’d given Bucky something of his in an awkward attempt to make things easier. It was endearing and he was going to treasure it until Virginia Potts physically fought him over it (he recognized her colours. How could he not when RiRi had created a bunch of ‘Ghost Peppers’, tiny drones in Miss Potts’ colours?).

Sam Wilson’s laughter, a sound akin to a garbage disposal as far as Bucky was concerned (except Sam’s mouth spewed garbage instead of disposing of it), drew him out of his thoughts.

“I’m gonna ask Stark for some shades of my own,”

Sam declared, slapping down his cards and waggling his eyebrows at Bucky,

“Since I’m his new favourite. He told me I’m ALRIGHT. Bet none of y’all have gotten that out of him.”

Bucky wrangled his hand free of Steve to flip him off (Steve quickly forced his finger down, though it was too late).

"A part of him is technically...”

He smirked, every inch the rake he used to be,

"Inside of me. Eat shit, Wilson, I’ve got you beat.”

While the Avengers argued, Bucky felt around his rapidly healing shoulder. The new mooring felt somehow more solid...more real than the old one. Stretching it ached, but not in the heavy bone-deep way it had before. It was warmer, too. Comfortable.

Tears pricked at his eyes. He was suddenly far more grateful for the sunglasses. Nobody could see him cry (not easily at least).

_____

"Sooooooo...”

Rhodey drew the word out, bracers whining with him in the most annoying way (Tony usually enjoyed hearing the bracers ‘talk’, but ever since Rhodey decided to start incorporating them into his own vocabulary, Tony kindof wanted to jam a muffler on them).

"You never did tell me what happened with Barnes. In his room. At night. Where you stayed for a loooooong time. You also never told me why you’re taking calls from him now when you were adamant not to before.”

Tony rolls his eyes. Rhodey was such a gossip, Tony bets he’s asked every other person in the compound first before coming back to whine at Tony.

"He’s...”

Tony hesitated, really thinking about what he wanted to say (Barnes still occasionally acted like he
was possessed? His interest in Tony was blatantly beyond that of a normal person but he was keeping a leash on it? He was happy when Tony was happy? He was trying?)

“Alright.”

Tony finished lamely.

“Tell me everything.”

Rhodey demands,

"Cause I’m beginning to feel like you’ve been replaced by a pod person.”

"I went to his room, we got into an argument since he felt like I was babying him, I made apology coffee-“

"Coffee!!?”

Rhodey asks, voice pitching unnaturally high. Tony winced. There wasn’t much you could keep a secret from somebody who’d known you for the better part of thirty years.

"Apology coffee-“

He tries, but Rhodey is having absolutely none of that shit.

“You made,”

Rhodey pinches the bridge of his nose in frustration,

“You made the scary assassin who wants to jump your bones coffee. You did the really nice coffee too, didn’t you?”

Tony throws his arms in the air,

“What do you want from me, Rhodes!?“

He asks,

“I made the therapy coffee! I was nervous! I did it without thinking!”

"Oh my God, Tony!!!”

Rhodey waves his arms in a dramatic X, the universal signifier for 'Tony, STOP!,'

“You made the assassin who wants to screw you into the mattress seduction coffee! You seduced his taste buds! You don’t even need to seduce him because he already seduced himself!”

"I know!“

Tony wailed,

“It was a mistake! He kept drinking it like-“
“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Tones!”

Rhodey cried out, making more Xs with his arms,

“I am really creeped out by Bucky Barnes. I do not need more reason to be.”

Tony groaned, throwing himself down on his mattress and screaming into his pillow in frustration. He hadn’t bumbled around this hard with somebody since...ugh, he didn’t even make this many mistakes with Pepper, partially because she didn’t let him. Tony hadn’t been this much of a mess with somebody since MIT, when one of the girls in his mechatronics course had tried asking him out 30 consecutive times before Tony had gotten the hint (he’d given her mixed signals for MONTHS because he had no concept of how to have a normal teenage friendship and had assumed, Oh Lord, that hand holding was part of the deal because of Rhodey. It had taken him over a year to really compute the rumours about them).

"He talked to me about his weird shit, flat out admitted he’s weird about me, and just...”

Tony rolled over, seizing Rhodey by the shoulders and dragging him down to eye level,

“Illuminate!”

Complete with an explosion hand gesture

Rhodey drew in a sharp scandalized breath.

“You didn’t.”

He hissed. Tony slowly turned away from him, sneaking the blanket over his head.

“You didn’t!”

Rhodey repeated, pulling the blanket back down.

“Oh my god, you did! JESSICA!”

Rhodey roared and ohhhhh no it was panic time for Tony.

"Rhodey, listen, no Jess! No Jess! We don’t need Jess for this conversation, baby cakes! Sugar plum! Pookie! This is a betrayal of my very fragile trust-“

Rhodey glared at him and Tony's mouth snapped shut.

"Ok, sure, I didn’t tell you right away but that’s different than tattling to Jess! There was nothing to tell-“

Rhodey glares even harder, quickly moving into military grade territory.

"OK, SO THIS IS A BIG DEAL, BUT IN MY DEFENCE-“

Jessica Jones slammed into the room.

“What’s going on?”
She asks before locking gazes with Tony (don't look away, Tony. She'll know. She'll know if you look away. Oh no it was really hard not to look away-).

“What did he do?”

Her tone has gone suspicious and Tony can see his life flashing before his eyes (Jess would launch him out a window and even Extremis wouldn't save him from the wrath that follows). He tries to defend himself, though he knows it’s too late.

"Barnes."

Is all Rhodey has to say to make Jessica go incandescent with rage.

As he gets lectured for the next hour or so, Tony grudgingly programs one of Barnes' cleaning bots to knock over his trash can and spread dust all over his bed. That’ll teach him (he also brushes gently against the information from Barnes’ hospital room, checking his vitals, tapping against the electrodes on the arm and breathing a sigh of relief when everything responded like it should. He wouldn't want Barnes to be trapped in the hospital when he needed to go flop in all the dust and garbage).

(...Barnes was still wearing his shades)

(...Tony could let that slide. For now. The bright hospital lights were probably a little much for the guy. Tony would get them back someday)

(In the meantime, he'd let Barnes sleep)

Chapter End Notes

The long string of quotes here is from Murakami's Kafka on the Shore. It's a section about fate and becoming a new person.

"Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside of you. So all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step."

Tony: *Internally quotes the most beautiful literature he can think of about transformation and fate when he thinks of Bucky*

Tony: If I don't call him by his name, I can maintain the distance between us.

Tony: *Gives Bucky things repeatedly*

Tony: *Uses personal mantra about transformation and becoming happier to give Bucky some hope*

Tony: Really, it's like there's a gulf here. Me and Barnes will never be close.

Tony: *Repeatedly tests that Bucky will respect his opinions and need for distance, constantly pokes at him in ways that are determining his suitability as a partner, gives
Bucky opportunities to engage in his interests*
Tony: REALLY IT'S LIKE WE ARE STRANNNNGERS IN THE DARK!
Rhodey: *inhales*
Rhodey: BOIIIIIIIII

Y'all can come on over and scream at me @ purgatoryandme.tumblr.com I just keep forgetting to mention it in the notes lmao.
Fire

Chapter Summary

Bucky LARPs while Steve bad ends HARD on a dating sim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even though Barnes' surgery felt like an ending to their awkward interactions, he still has to spend some time with Tony over the next two weeks (the shoulder mooring's responses to stress need to be consistent for it to stay where it was. If anything was even a little bit off, Tony was ripping that puppy out). Every time Tony rolls out of bed, Robocop is already in his workshop, lurking in the shadows like a weirdo. Except when Tony enters the room, well...

Barnes brighter somehow. Happier. Hints of the charm he’d once had are becoming more obvious (essentially, Tony has achieved his 'make him less weird' goal in the most regrettable way possible. He hadn't wanted Barnes to be so...Barnes).

Everything he does becomes a weird combination of overly sincere and playful. He brings all kinds of random hard candies to the lab. He leaves them scattered in obscure locations for Tony to find, never trying to hand them over or watch Tony's reactions (which were annoyed bafflement back when this first began, but were quickly moving towards 'pleased curiosity'. He had a sweet tooth). Butterfingers, sadistic mess that he was, enjoying running them over or crushing them whenever they were in reach, leaving Tony to step on the extremely pointy rubble.

Despite his bleeding feet, Tony doesn’t ask Barnes to quit playing candy man. The bots are having fun, so what’s the harm? Besides, the peach and strawberry ones that kept spontaneously appearing in Tony’s tool closet were pretty good (they had cute kittens on the wrapper. He liked to imagining Barnes going to the store and buying them, because there was no way Friday willingly let him order them in. Was Barnes even allowed out and about in the city?).

They don’t really talk, but he still feels like he’s gotten to know Barnes better in a mysterious way (he knows how much Barnes likes sweets now, knows how he looks when he's stepped on his own candy bombs, how comfortable he was in the silence between them, how curious he was about the future, the bots, the ridiculous rollerskate rockets Tony had created when he was 19-). Again, Barnes was charming when he was happy.

Speaking of which - Barnes charms the fuck out of Pepper when she swings by the office. He has shades in her colours tucked into his hair (Tony still hadn’t gotten them back. Kept forgetting to ask and all that jazz. Yup, forgetting...on a daily basis) which has been braided back into a man bun (“There’s tutorials for all kinds of things online!” He’d told Pepper with a giant grin, flashing those ridiculous pearly whites, “Even if you’ve only got one hand, you can still fancy yourself up!” When Pepper had asked the name of his hairstyle, the sly fucker had winked and said it roughly translated to 'date night' but cruder. Cruder like 'get dick night'. Tony may have looked up the tutorial. Barnes only wore it to come to the workshop).

He doesn’t charm anyone else though, mostly because any attempts to do so made them suspicious, therefore making him seem even creepier. It was kind of funny (Barnes sucking up to Rhodey had...
gone...astronomically badly. Clint had screamed when Barnes had offered to play a game with him),
though Tony legitimately used Extremis to suppress his laughter each time it tried to bubble to the
surface (he wasn’t giving Barnes anything else, no sir, not at all! The charity was getting off the
ground, but that was it. Internally quoting Kafka on the Shore has been too ominous for him -
getting closer to Barnes wasn’t going to be anything ridiculous like fate. Not that fate was
ridiculous-).

When his regular appointments are finally over and the shoulder data points only to good things,
Tony is relieved. He was starting to get some kind of emotional whiplash from Barnes’ almost well-
adjusted behaviour. Now he can finally shoo the Soldier out the door.

He's relieved.

He is.

It's just...after having so many people around working on a single project, the lab seems a little
emptier than usual. It’s not lonely. HE isn’t lonely. There’s no reason for him to be - him and
Rhodey have finally made a schedule to fly together at night, the kids are all doing well (though
Peter had been sneaking off more often to see MJ with hearts in his dumb little bug eyes), and he
gets to mercilessly tease Jess since her and Luke were doing well. Better yet, Rhodey had plans to
ask Carol on an actual date.

Everything was great.

Tony sighed and pressed his cheek against the cold metal of his lab bench. Butterfingers whirred and
patted him on the head, bouncing his skull off the metal painfully.

"I’m fine, buddy."

Tony said,

“I’m doing great. Just great."

——

Tony didn’t rejoin the Avengers drills because he was lonely. That would be ridiculous. An absolute
falsehood, a cosmic mistake, dividing by zero.

Vision and Rhodey were both also cosmic mistakes because they kept side-eying him. Move over
OLD best friends, Friday was his new partner in crime.

——

Guiding RiRi through a complex flight pattern while simultaneously keeping his own suit on a
different path didn’t usually leave Tony with much computing power to notice anything else.
However, a special panicked part of his brain was dedicated to noticing any suspicious movements
from either Steve or Barnes (or anything bad happening to Rhodey. That was more than just one
panicked part of his brain, though). That part of him tugged his attention from RiRi down to the
ground right as they were both completing a dizzying corkscrew (the kind that always made Tony
want to shout out in excitement).

Barnes was lounging on top of the building they were cresting over, making a snow angel out
of...scattered robot parts (were those...knights? The Hell?). And shields. With...family crests? From Medieval times? Wait, oh shit, shields from the ACTUAL Medieval Times, as in the theatre show because those looked extremely familiar (not that Tony spent a lot of time at those shows...anymore)-

And there was something in his hand catching the light. A big something.

It was a replica of Excalibur.

Without a thought, Extremis connected Tony to Barnes’ com and filled the line with his stunned laughter (this...this NERD).

Barnes locked on to Tony immediately, scrambling to his feet so he could salute with his blade and kneel.

Tony landed with a heavy graceless thud, RiRi a few paces behind him (sending him confused pings that he was ignoring for the beautiful sight before him. He was going to make fun of Barnes for years. Right after he got his hands on that blade).)

Tony took the weapon presented to him, chuckling.

“Did Friday teach you how to make this?”

He asks, snorting when Barnes flushes (he’s getting used to Barnes’ face flooding with colour, making the blue in his eyes stand out that much more. He still got a kick out of how ridiculous it looked, all blotchy, though it made for a better sight when Barnes’ shirt was off),

“Bet she set up the robot knights, too. Though...I don't want to know where the shields came from, actually. I can’t go to jail if I don't know anything.”

Tony flips the blade over in his hands, admiring the well-honed edge. It's pretty impressive that Barnes had managed to, what, forge something like this (did he wear a blacksmith's apron and glove or did he just go shirtless? Tony typically just let himself get burned when he worked in a forge - it's not like a shirt ever saved him from flying sparks. Besides, sweating all over it was usually pretty gross). It makes him wonder whether or not Barnes bothered to do it the classical way or if he modernized his methods. Grinning, Tony points the blade at Barnes and says,

"If you wanted to LARP, Sword in the Soldier, I could’ve set you up with any hobby group in a fifty mile radius. I'm sure they'd be delighted to have a proper beefcake in their midsts."

A confused furrow dug itself between Barnes’ brows and Tony viciously stepped on his own delight. He wasn’t going to talk LARPing with the Winter Soldier. Even if it would be HILARIOUS, he wasn’t going to do it (did...did Barnes know about DND?).

He flipped the blade again (adding in a little flair...maybe, just MAYBE, him and Rhodey learned to juggle daggers at a Medieval Fair. And swallow swords. And fence) to place it back in Barnes’ hand, but Barnes shook his head.

“Aintcha gonna knight me?”

He asks with a crooked (slightly unsure, ugh why was that endearing!?) smirk,

“I need a king to recognize my prowess of the battlefield to become a lord. If I don’t, my lady love Friday will make me pay her back for the materials. I'm just a peasant right now, so I'll have to
become a farmer or worse... a nerf herder.”

Damn Barnes for being so earnest. Damn him for being funny. Damn him for forging this dork-ass blade with Tony's best girl and watching Star Wars with her (maybe Barnes did know about geek culture then? Or maybe he was just being introduced to it? There was so much material Tony could work with - no, stop, don't go there).

Exasperated (fond, why was he fond, he shouldn't be fond, not now not ever-), Tony knighted him, complete with a,

“Now you’re an Avenger, Sir LARPs-a-lot.”

Embarrassed yet pleased, panicked yet amused, Tony took off immediately after (he had nearly blurted "To many towered Camelot!"). Hell, he had nearly purchased a bunch of horses right then and there for a full-scale re-enactment). He was hoping nobody thought too much of their entire exchange. Unfortunately, RiRi's suspicious quiet told him that she’d already tattled to Rhodey. Tony was in for a world of trouble, wasn't he?

"Every time I turn around, I expect Buck to be at my back. And he is - he’s never abandoned me. But he’s never looking at anything but Tony. And Tony...lately Tony's been looking back.”

Steve said, ballpoint pen marking off concentric swirls of light on the sketch pad his (Bucky’s) therapist had dumped in his hands.

"Tony made it clear he wanted to be left alone.”

He says, digging the pen deeper into the page,

“He doesn’t want anything to do with me or Bucky. But now..”

The dark slashes of ink began to form a triangle.

"He can’t even look at me. He can’t look at me but he can let Bucky fall all over him. He came into the gym during me and Buck’s training time - he NEVER does that. He looked surprised, but Bucky stopped moving and got thrown off the treadmill-“

His (Bucky’s) therapist winced in sympathy as Steve kept going,

“And Tony smiled! He tried to cover it with his hands, but he smiled and he called Bucky ‘Buckling’ even though I’m still Steve. Steve if I'm lucky...half the time I swear I'm still 'Rogers'."

The image forming on the page wasn’t one he wanted to look at. His sketchbook had been a mess of half-formed fantasies lately (he was trying to sustain a flame that was sputtering out).

His (Bucky’s) therapist extends his scarred and gnarled hand, a silent request for the sketch pad. Steve nearly tears the image on it to shreds before he remembers himself and hands it over.

The old man’s eye roamed over the lines of the arc reactor and the way the light surrounding it wisped away into nothing (like the hottest part of a plasma torch).

"Mr Stark has been spending time with Mr Barnes, largely against his own preferences, mind you. It is natural that he’s begun taken note of Mr Barnes’ interest. He seems to be a pragmatic man who is
deeply invested in healing - perhaps their mending of bridges means not all hope is lost for you?"

He says, flipping the page face down (Steve wondered if the drawing made him uncomfortable. The old man was pretty unflappable, but lately Steve's talk of Tony seemed to be a sore spot).

“If hope is lost, though, you need to respect that. Your actions were the product of your trauma and your best attempts to resolve a terrible situation, though the fact remains: you victimized Mr Stark. He may not forgive you, Steven.”

Steve knows that. He’s accepted it even though the idea makes a part of him ache for the ice and gentle swaying of the Arctic Ocean. Tony had shown him the future and Steve would never stop missing him, though he would never try to force him to forgive him (not intentionally at least. Even if he tried unintentionally, he was sure Tony would put him in his place. He was one of the only people as stubborn as Steve when it came down to it, which was why-).

It was just...Bucky.

Why did it (always) have to be Bucky?

Why did Tony have to forgive Bucky, somebody so close to Steve he was practically an extension of his own heart? Somebody Steve had thought Tony would be unable to forgive (the reason Steve had-)?

He struggles to articulate this, what was WRONG with this, for another half hour before he lapses entirely into silence.

As he leaves his session, he feels his (Bucky’s) therapist’s gaze burrowing into his back. His worry hangs heavy around Steve until the door shuts.

Steve is heading back to his room when he sees Bucky in the kitchen watching a video. The figure on screen is unmistakably Tony (Steve is beginning to think he would know him anywhere, even from miles away, and wasn't that just the kicker? He'd only ever be able to see Tony's face from miles away, while Bucky was sitting here-). His expression is reluctantly fond (an expression Steve knows well. Tony always used to wear it in their early days, back when they started thawing towards each other and Tony didn't want to be charmed by Steve's stilted attempts to get to know him, when he'd wanted to be resentful but he'd really been falling-) and he is gently placing a sword against both of Bucky's shoulders.

Bucky's thumb presses pause (at the exact second a flash of delight crosses Tony's face) and Steve can just barely see the redness riding high on his ears (Bucky had always blushed easier than Steve, despite Steve's pale Irish skin. It was a permanent source of embarrassment for him).

"Illuminate."

Bucky whispers, voice husky with want,

"Yeah, he sure does, doesn't he Friday? Lights up the whole damn room when he wants to."

Steve doesn’t have the patience for this anymore. He always waited too long. He waited too long for Peggy, he waited too long to urge anyone to search for Bucky, waited too long to look at how
suspicious Shield was, then waited too long to tell Tony how he felt (how many times had he considered saying something before he found out about Tony's parents? How many late nights had they spent together, just soaking in each other's presence, where Steve could've just said the words-).

He knew his therapist thought he should spend his time learning to control himself instead of his environment and the people in it (“Commanding armies when there’s nobody to fight just gives rise to fear.” He had said, brows forming a severe slash above his single dark eye. He’d spoken with weight, with intent, like he knew what lay down that road).

He knew that.

But he wasn’t going to fucking listen, because if he waited one more second, Tony was going to do what dozens of girls in the past had done when Steve couldn’t do anything but wait for them to notice him (too sickly, too small, so much less than anything they’d want, no matter how many times he tried to make them see what he could be).

They'd fall for Bucky Barnes.

And Bucky...Bucky deserved to be happy, but Steve had been here first, and damn it all he was going to make his stance known first, too.

He had to.

(He didn’t want to lose anything else)

Avoiding Rhodey was hard work, especially considering that he knew all of Tony's codes and favourite places to hide. There were downsides to being friends with someone almost as long as you'd been alive.

Still, he’d managed to tuck himself away in a corner of Vision’s zen garden that would be difficult for Rhodey to enter on the bracers (he felt a bit guilty about it, to be honest. It felt like he was taking advantage of something he shouldn't, even if he knew Rhodey would whoop his ass for even thinking that).

When he heard the crunch of footsteps, Tony was confused. Vision preferred floating and Rhodey made a Hell of a lot more noise than that (his bracers were exceedingly chatty, no matter what Tony did to calm them down. He’d oiled their joints, taken good care of them, read them a bedtime story - it sucked that Rhodey wouldn't let him keep upgrading them). Nobody else ever wandered this part of the compound.

Then, he heard someone draw in a long breath and change directions.

Tony’s heart jackhammered. Was he being tracked? That was exceptionally alarming, 0/10 would not recommend (honestly, did he need to shower more often? Is that what this was? Carol had sniffed him a few times, making weird faces the whole time, and he knew at least a little bit about Barnes' weird kink). He was going to stab Barnes in his only remaining arm for this-

Steve suddenly rounded the corner, pushing between two stone obelisks and crunching over gravel towards Tony's hiding place in a hidden gazebo.
This was bad.

Tony sent out an alert to Friday, not willing to notify Rhodey or Vision just yet, and took comfort from the pressure of her incorporeal hand on his shoulder (wishing they could lace their fingers together even though he wasn’t willing to risk Steve knowing she was there. If things went south, he’d need to get the jump on him. He knew better now than to assume Steve wouldn’t hurt him).

"Steve."

He greets, shifting so his back was firmly pressed to the wall of the gazebo. He grits his teeth when Steve smiles at him, guileless and genuinely happy to see him.

"Tony."

He says, soft and weirdly reverent. It sets off every alarm Tony has. Steve hasn’t said his name like that since the early days of the Avengers (late night conversations about this brave new world, about the things that had changed for the better, the world that Tony loved-). Steve keeps getting closer, too, though his advance stops when Tony visibly presses tighter against the wall at his back.

"What did you need so badly you had to hunt me like we're on an episode of Mantracker?"

Tony bites out. Steve’s eyes are big and blue and entirely too focused on his face. He’s being read in a way that makes him extremely uncomfortable (while everything he actually SAYS is being ignored).

"Tony, I’ve wanted to see you for awhile, but I didn’t know how you’d take it and-"

Steve is turning red (it isn’t nearly as charming on him as it was on Barnes. Here it didn't signify anything funny or good). His hands are shaking. It’s...bizarre.

"I would take it badly, Steve."

Tony says bluntly, shooting confused glances at Steve’s hands, which are currently wringing the fabric of his shirt nervously,

“The last time we spoke I had a panic attack. You’ve never really apologized to me about that, so I figured we weren’t on speaking terms.”

Steve winces. He looks a little bit like he wants to cry, which just adds to the surreal nature of this entire interaction (had Tony stepped through a portal into an alternate dimension? That might explain a few things about his current life situation, really).

"I’m..."

He seems to almost chew the word, which honestly pisses Tony off even if he KNOWS that this is just how Steve is (always has been, always will be),

“Sorry. I’m really sorry, Tony. I had no right to yell at you like that. I keep...”

He steps closer again, heedless of Tony's expression shuttering with his focus so wholly on his own hands,

“I never say what I want to say around you. You drive me so crazy that I just can’t-“
Tony snaps,

“I don’t make you speak to me the way you do, Steve. That’s insulting.”

Steve holds deathly still, gaze now fixed on his boots,

“I know that. I’m not saying it’s your fault. I’m just...tongue-tied with you. Keep getting overworked about everything, like a fire, and I see you and all your passion about the world and - and it’s like gasoline.”

Tony shudders. That’s a statement he can agree with. He’s the same way - interacting with Steve always leads to an explosion burning out of control. It’s regrettable, though maybe if Steve can see that, too...

”You set me on fire, Tony.”

He says, gently cupping Tony’s cheek in a way that told Tony they were seeing this conversation in two wildly different ways. Once he would’ve been excited to see this happen, would’ve surged forward and dumped gasoline all over what Steve was offering him, but now...

He was scared shitless.

”Steve.”

He said, seizing Steve’s wrist,

“What are you doing?”

’Go home’ is what he wanted to say (stop doing this. Stop picking up the past, dusting it off, and trying to make it fit into the fissures in your heart).

Still, just like with Barnes, Steve couldn’t stop repeating the same fucking thing over and over and over again (‘you turn, but the storm adjusts’ yeah, and it swallowed them whole, pounding their bones to dust).

”I’m not waiting anymore.”

Steve whispered, brushing a thumb over Tony's lower lip,

“I’m in love with you, Tony Stark. Have been since I woke up.”

Tony's stomach dropped out beneath him. He had wanted to hear those words for years. Had wanted to hear them for so long it felt like he’d gone back in time, the cloak of the Merchant of Death still hanging around his shoulders, Steve still floating in the ocean-

”Well he doesn’t fucking love you back.”

That was Rhodey's voice, but Tony had never in his life heard it like that. It was icy, shaking with the cold of it. The closest he’d ever heard it was (Howard’s watch cracking against his jaw as his fingers grasped a handful of Tony's too-long hair, Rhodey standing in the doorway where Jarvis had let him in. It had just been a visit...just a visit, but he’d come in right when Howard had decided - fuck - Tony had ruined his legacy by calling Rhodey sweetheart on the phone. Had acted like a sissy. Tony had tried to tell Howard, to warn him someone was there, but he hadn’t listened because he never listened when Tony was being too soft for his tastes. Rhodey had...God he’d greeted Howard
in a tone Tony hadn’t even recognized, empty of anything but chilly fury, grabbed Tony's hand and pulled him up to his room. He’d cried there. He’d cried because he was too angry to do anything else, whispering “I should kill him.” In that same tone while knowing he’d never stand a chance)...a long time ago in a memory best left forgotten.

Tony snapped out of it when Rhodey's bracers screeched and he muscled Steve to the side. Carol had a firm hand on Steve's shoulder (explaining how Rhodey had dropped in so silently - Carol had given him help), her other hand just barely restraining Rhodey's forward momentum.

"I’m sick to death,”

Rhodey hissed,

“Of super soldiers sniffing around my little brother.”

He stepped fully in front of Tony and jabbed Steve in the chest with one finger,

“I’m sick to death,”

He said louder,

“Of people who try to break his fucking heart crawling back and thinking he’ll take them in because he should.”

He jabs Steve again,

“What the fuck makes you think you deserve him? What the fuck makes you think he’d be happy with you?!?”

"Colonel Rhodes.”

Carol reprimands him, but Rhodey shrugs off her hand, standing at his full height,

“No, Carol I respect you with everything I’ve got, heart and soul, but Tony comes first. Somebody needs to put him first.”

"You,”

He says, looming over Steve now as the other man slumped,

“You act like you’re so sure you’ll make Tony happy. Like you’re so sure loving him is enough - that you’ll be enough.”

Rhodey sneered,

“It wasn’t, though. You loved him when you smashed in his chest. You loved him when you lied to him. You will NEVER,”

Ugly emotions, the kind that almost never touched Rhodey, not where Tony could see, twisted his expression,

“Have my blessing. Ever. Because even if you learn from your mistakes, Rogers, so do I. And I’ll
never trust you with him again.”

Rhodey raised his curled fist, muscles wound tight enough that the veins were popping, and Tony flashed back to Rhodey turning to look at Howard on the stairs with poison in his eyes. He had known Rhodey would lose something then, and he knew Rhodey would lose something now if he did what he wanted to do (Carol was right there, better than Tony had ever been, and he didn’t want Rhodey to lose that). So he leaned his head against the back of his best friend’s neck.

“Illuminate.”

He whispered into the skin there (Steve made a sound like he’d been gut-punched even though Rhodey hadn’t moved. Tony wasn’t going to think about that. He wasn’t going to let him poison this for him).

Rhodey whirled, gathering Tony into his arms. He crushed him to his chest with shaking hands (metal from his bracers digging into Tony’s thighs and bruising him before Extremis could sweep it all away).

"I’ve loved Tony for longer than any of you miserable fuckwits.”

He says into Tony’s hair (too long, easy for Howard to sink his fingers into, flinging Tony into the wall again and again and-), "Just because it ain’t romantic doesn’t mean it’s worth less and you’d do well to remember that. I found him when no one else could. I fought with him when the rest of you galloped off into the sunset. I scraped him off the floor after Howard, after he lost Jarvis and Maria, after Obidiah, after YOU - I’ve been there for years. What the fuck are you? What makes you think you’re so important?"

Tony was stunned. He knew Rhodey loved him - Tony loved him, too - but they weren’t the type to talk about it often. When they did, it was soft or it was joking. It was never this till death do us part speech. That had been ripped out of them years ago (Howard by the phone, Howard hovering over his shoulder, the students at MIT saying whatever they wanted about a brilliant black student and how his achievements seemed to double when Tony Stark looked at him with his sissy doe-eyes, and-).

Tony felt it too, though. What love boiled down to between them was a wire of pure vibranium. Something immutable, something lasting, un tarnished...till the day they died.

"Here’s some food for thought, white boy: if you loved Tony right, I wouldn’t hate your guts.”

"Colonel Rhodes, that’s enough.”

Carol says softly. Rhodey sagged against Tony, draping all of his weight over his head and shoulders.

"I’m sorry.”

Steve said (his voice sadder and emptier than Tony had ever heard it, damn it, damn it all to Hell and back - why couldn’t Steve just be like Hammer? Worthless and worth hating), “I just wanted him to know how I feel.”
Rhodey growled.

“Again,”

He said, straightening up,

“What makes you think you’re so damn important? You ain’t shit.”

With that, Tony extracted himself from Rhodey’s arms (though his hands still dig into Tony’s shoulders, white-knuckled and trembling with rage). He turned to face Steve, steeling himself mentally and with Extremis for the expression on his face.

Lost.

Crushed.

Hungry (an echo of Barnes, even in this).

The devastation there... Tony felt it keenly for a second before he cut it off. Cut it out by the root. Everything he had ever felt for Steve was dead. He’d even kill his empathy if he had to.

“I don’t love you, Steve.”

Tony said,

“Not anymore, at least.”

He doesn’t add any detail to it (not after you drove your shield into my heart, not after you tried to lie to me at the very end, not after you never apologized because you NEVER apologize, not after-). He doesn’t want to be cruel (he would want to be, he thinks, if he actually felt nothing. He wishes he felt nothing). He hadn’t wanted to say anything at all about whatever had been between them once (if it didn’t exist, the betrayal wasn’t so sharp). He had wanted to sweep it under the rug to forget about forever.

Maybe...he had wanted to be friends. Maybe he'd wanted that more than anything else.

He thinks he did underneath it all. He’d always wanted to be SOMETHING to Steve (maybe he always would).

That wasn’t what Steve wanted, though. He wasn’t sure if he could ever trust that that would ever be what Steve wanted (he wanted fuel for his fire, and Tony didn’t want to burn).

Unsure how to proceed, Tony grabbed Rhodey's hand and made his getaway.

Vision's zen garden wasn’t so zen anymore.

Carol and Steve sat back to back in the gazebo, watching the sun set. As it finally sunk below the horizon, Steve spoke,

”I think we needed that. That - that ending. It’s closure.”

Carol snorted and Steve wiped at his eyes, too exhausted to be angry with Carol's near-constant
depreciation of his life choices.

"You didn’t need anything, Captain."

She said,

“You wanted something and you got it. But at what cost?"

She sounded as tired as Steve felt.

"You cornered Tony and made him break your heart. You made him commit to ending something that, honestly Captain, didn’t need to."

Steve laughed, low and bitter,

"Me and Tony were always going be everything or nothing. Fuel and fire - either it’s burning or it’s not, together or separate."

Carol stood, yanking Steve's chin up so they could see eye to eye,

"You could’ve been EVERYTHING as friends. You’ve seen Tony and Rhodes, and you already have your whole thing with Sergeant Barnes. I’ve never had anything like that, but if I did I wouldn’t just junk it like this."

She says, a distinct note of frustration in her tone,

“You don’t just dump an entire canister of gasoline into a car. You ignite it bit by bit. You let it refill. This is the dumbest metaphor I’ve been forced to use in ages."

She lets Steve's chin go and cracks her knuckles,

“I haven’t known you long, but I can tell you this: you’re always rushing, Steve. Hurry up and wait, that’s all you do. Why can’t you just let life happen to you?”

Steve doesn’t answer. He’s already gone over this question in therapy repeatedly. He knows Carol knows that, too.

It stung to have failed like this. His therapist wasn’t going to be happy. To be entirely honest with himself, Steve had known he’d be unhappy with this since the idea first occurred to him.

"Steve."

Carol says, far gentler now,

“You’re a good man. And somehow, you and Tony have been good together before. I don’t want to see you ruin that to prove to yourself that you don’t belong here."

Carol's words pierced him like a bullet, stinging like ice water against his skin. Christ, this woman didn’t pull any punches (even his therapist had pulled that one, though he’d clearly thought it).

"There will come a time where you’ll need to trust Tony at your back. Actually TRUST him to be there. When that time comes, he’ll be there, Steve. Because if he isn’t, you’re both going to die."

She tells him, expression troubled as she stared up at the night sky,
“And it’s coming sooner than you think. Get it together, Soldier. Don’t fuck up again.”

Chapter End Notes

**Carol:** *inhales*

**Bucky and Steve's Therapist:** *INHALES*

**Both:** *SCREAMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!*!!!!!!!*

**Rhodey:** *thunking around in the workshop*

**Tony:** Whatchu up to, buddy?

**Rhodey:** Building a time machine.

**Tony:** Aw, is it so you can go back to MIT and party it up with me one more time?

**Rhodey:** *slips gun into pocket*

**Rhodey:** Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm going to do.

**Tony:** Does...does this machine say 1940s on it?

**Rhodey:** ...No.

**Tony:** *picks up paper*

**Tony:** Does this say hit list on it?

**Rhodey:** ...No. It's a...grocery list.

**Tony:** ...Rhodey, this just says 'Howard Stark' underlined several times. Also I think I see Bucky's name scratched out?

**Rhodey:** ...It's not what it looks like-

**Tony:** If you wanted to kill my dad, you'd have to do it after I was born, dumbass.

**Rhodey:** *thinks about his plot to murder Howard before he'd worked on Project Rebirth*

**Rhodey:** *thinks about his plan to get two birds with one stone*

**Rhodey:** Damn, you right.

Anyway, as I forgot to mention until awhile after updating last time, y'all can always come yell at me on purgatoryandme.tumblr.com where I post sneak peaks sometimes, answer questions, and very very rarely do meta for own shit.
Rhodey and Bucky play Mortal Kombat before Bucky sends his kid off to school.

It's Friday who tells Bucky about what happened in the garden.

They've struck up something of a friendship over their mutual need to surveil Tony (which had strengthened in Bucky by about 100x after Friday started telling him about some of the things Tony used to get up to. The man was a menace) and the awkwardness that sometimes came with being 'human' (and a replacement for someone else, though they'd never admit it).

Bucky is...indescribably angry for awhile. It's bad. It's worse than anything he'd experienced since his therapist started taking care of him. He accidentally wrecks his phone when he tries to call the old man, but luckily Friday puts a line through for him through the compound speakers (he's grateful for her. He's so incredibly grateful for her. That kind of silent support, even when she didn't entirely trust him, meant everything right now).

His therapist, his unflappable therapist who has seen more than Bucky will ever know, is nervous when he sees the state Bucky is in and begins to piece together the full story (there's a look in his eye that is suspiciously similar to guilt). It sends Bucky spiraling a little further, smooth winter cold sliding over his bones and condensing around his new shoulder.

Steve held his hand during his surgery for that.

Steve was STEVE. He was unconditional support and love, even if there were times he would fight Bucky with everything he had (Azzano, a time when Bucky had been too willing to shoot, and Steve hadn't been willing enough-).

That was what family was for. They were family.

He had to remember that.

Remember the words that dragged him out of Hydra's control (till the end of the line) and brought him home, the words that chased him through dozens of countries and faces and lives-

Steve had given everything up for him. Steve was STEVE - good through and through even if he was an angry little fucker and stupid as Hell when it came to his relationships. He didn’t mean anything bad, probably hadn’t meant to corner Tony at all, but Bucky was ANGRY he was SO ANGRY (remembering the way Tony had shut down after game day, remembering the way Tony had finally, FINALLY, begun to smile at him, kneeling in his room with his hand on Bucky's face, changing his entire goddamn world)-

Steve wanted Tony to reject him (so he could 'let go', graciously step out of the way, Jesus how many years had Bucky been trying to beat that out of him), had probably wanted him to reject them
both *(jealous piece of-)*, and wow, no, for once logically analyzing an emotional situation wasn’t making anything better.

It might actually make things worse.

*(Mission compromised, conflicting goals, adjust parameters-)*

He methodically disassembles all his guns under his therapist's watchful eyes. He crushes vital parts in his fist so he can’t put them back together *(his SIG sitting sadly in the space underneath his bed. He loved that gun, but damn it he loved Steve more).* There’s not much he can do about the knives - if he warped them he could just warp them back. It was fine to leave them. Steve would survive a stab wound anyway-

God, he had KNOWN. He had KNOWN Steve loved Tony. He had watched him stew over it. He’d been willing to duke it out with him, make it a fair fight if it ever came to it, if Tony ever even looked at either of them twice and Steve had just-

He’d waited too long to apologize, realized he’d waited too long for SOMETHING, and then rushed into...what? Beating Bucky to a goal he had a snowball's chance in Hell of reaching anyways? Fuck.

Self-sabotage wrapped in jealousy, desperation, and competition.

Even after the serum, Steve still couldn’t believe that somebody he loved could ever care about him and Bucky at the same time, or that somebody could NOT care about Bucky. Bucky was a goddamn mess, what the Hell did Steve think he was going to do? Make Tony pity him so strongly he fell in love *(sometimes Bucky felt like everything between him and Steve had never changed, that they were still two pieces of the same puzzle, but sometimes he looked into the mirror and wondered who Steve saw in his face).*

Sweet Jesus, Bucky felt bad for Steve, but if he saw him he was gonna stab him. He was definitely gonna stab 'im. Make 'im bleed a lil. There was no force on earth that would hold him back from that.

The monster in his head was banging against his skull, getting louder and more insistent by the minute *(sometimes Bucky looked into the mirror and wondered who Steve saw in his face, because sometimes Bucky didn't see anybody there at all).*

Bang, bang, BANG-

A shudder rolled through his body, his fist buried in the floor, his head not screwed on quite right-

Unable to stand around any longer, Bucky drags himself out to the training room to try and exhaust his body to the point that he’d be useless in a fight anyway *(the Winter Soldier could fight until he died, so that probably wouldn’t work, but hey it was the thought that counts).*

Unfortunately for him, the training room was where Colonel Rhodes was currently obliterating hundreds of targets with a dangerous look on his face.

Bucky pivots on his heel, fury clawing at his chest *(why couldn’t he just be alone-)* but Colonel Rhodes fires a round right next to his head that makes him reluctant to try leaving again.

"You."

The man’s voice is shaking. Bucky has heard a lot of tones from Colonel Rhodes, however they’d
always been some degree of steady. That man was a rock. Not anymore it seemed (*Bucky was in too shitty of a place to deal with this*).

"You ‘Super Soldiers’,"

Bucky could hear the mocking emphasis on both super and soldier crystal clear,

“Need to stay in your goddamned lanes. Hang out with your best friends and leave mine alone.”

There's some forced humour in Colonel Rhodes’ voice. It was just barely concealing something worse (War Machine was a hero, but he’d killed before. He’d killed under his own command. He sounded like he was a few steps away from picking Bucky as a target and damn it all, Bucky was just tired)

"In fact, listen. Tony will build you a time machine. Go back to the 1940s. Die of old age. Never EVER appear in his life again."

That was threatening (the animal Bucky kept tucked inside, the weapon, was beginning to bristle territorially. He wanted to slap it, but also really really wanted to let it loose).

"If either of you,"

Colonel Rhodes’ voice is closer and mechanized now, filtering through his face plate (*bad, that was bad*),

“Step into MY lane again,”

There was a whine as some kind of weapon powered up,

“Come into MY house and mess with MY family,”

The ting of metal against metal,

“I’ll do to you what I should’ve done to his rat bastard of a father. I’ll incinerate you so he’ll never know what happened. Tell him you went on a nice vacation to Tahiti.”

Bucky's vision was tunnelling, all the anger he’d felt earlier slipping sideways into the void. He could kill Colonel Rhodes in an instant. Could jam the guns, avoid the energy weapons, find something in the training room to jam into the legs of the suit...

He could make it look like an accident, just like the Colonel was proposing (*erase the evidence*). (*Safety on, illuminate*)

Colonel Rhodes was Tony's best friend. He hadn’t done anything yet. He was a hero. He would probably only kill Bucky and Steve if they deserved it.

Heat was rolling off the suit right behind him. Sweat was beading on Bucky’s neck as he wrestled with (Profile: War Machine. Contains energy weapons, however has notable preference for automatic guns and minor explosives. Armour density lowest at the joints-) the urge to DO SOMETHING about it.

"You might be thinking...”
Rhodes said, flat and empty and calling all of Bucky’s worst memories to the surface,

“That you aren’t killing me because of Tony.”

A gun pressed tight to the back of his head (*compromised, he was compromised-*).

"But you’re wrong. You couldn’t kill me in this compound if you tried. I’M not killing YOU because of Tony.”

Bucky heard it then, the unnatural hum of the door (*mag-locked so even he couldn’t open it*) and a similar hum in the ceiling (*Friday had made vague mention of the compound’s security under her control. Friday obeyed Tony, but now Bucky has to wonder if she obeyed Rhodes too. The taste of betrayal sat bitterly on his tongue, and yet...*).

"I won’t hurt him.”

Bucky says, making Rhodes dig the gun further into his skull,

“I’m pretty sure I’d rather die.”

Rhodes releases his weapon, but Bucky gets the distinct impression he hasn’t done enough yet to sleep safely. Rhodes will turn on him again - the man had clearly lost his patience. And God, it was fucked up considering he had just threatened Bucky, but he wanted Rhodes’ approval more than he wanted to walk out of this room in one piece.

"During that first simulation, I was going to shoot Wanda.”

He答题, freezing Rhodes in place,

“And that was before I actually KNEW Tony. I decked Steve in the face when I first realized that Tony was scared of him. I got Jessica to kick my ass when I realized he was scared of me.”

Panic swelled in his chest (*safety on, Barnes. Those were choices. They weren’t a hand aiming the gun - Rhodes isn’t going to point you at anything*),

“Now I know him and he’s - Tony is - he’s really something. Soft when you push him the wrong way. Just sinks in on himself even if he’ll destroy you for it later.”

He nervously wipes his mouth, risking a glance at Rhodes,

“I don’t wanna push him.”

Words were the bane of Bucky’s existence. Skepticism practically rolled off Rhodes in waves. Bucky soldiered onward,

"I try - safety on, you know? To be safe. For him. And for me, but mostly for him. I can’t say I won’t fuck up, I won’t be able to ‘stay in my lane’, but I won’t do the same thing twice.”

"You think you love Tony?”

Rhodes hisses. Bucky...can’t answer that. He’s always been hungry, never been satisfied with anything, falling hard and fast before moving on to the next obsession. Tony had been (*still was in many ways that Bucky had simply shelved, a Pandora’s box begging to be opened*) an obsession.
But he was also...something more (and less).

"None of you,"

Rhodes gestured around the entire compound,

"Have any idea what loving Tony is really like."

Bucky thinks Rhodes is probably right. Bucky’s loyal when it counts, has loved and been with Steve for years (a lifetime of trust even if he wanted to punch Steve in the dick for the situation he was currently in), gave himself over to the Commandos (broken bits and all), but...he can hardly imagine what the past 30 or so years of Rhodes’ life have been like (him and Steve rarely separated, but Rhodes had been overseas dozens of times when Tony put his life on the line. Overdoses, Afghanistan, Iron Man).

"Tony is terrifying."

Rhodes says,

"The whole fucking world has it out for him. I turn away for even a SECOND and somebody or something has destroyed him, made him break patterns that I’ve been memorizing for years. YEARS to keep him healthy and, fuck, maybe not happy, but ALIVE."

Rhodes steps out of the armour in Bucky’s peripheral vision,

"And then he’s reborn and you think everything is fine even though he’s different now. But then you begin to wonder how many times the same man can come back from the dead before nothing is left. Tony makes you believe that he will ALWAYS come home, but he also..."

The bracers whine and Rhodes stumbles, falling to his knees and swearing angrily,

"He also lets you KNOW that he’ll be taken away again. And you can’t do shit to stop it."

Rhodes struggles back to his feet and leans his head against the suit, breathing hard. He looks awful.

"Your man is the kind of ‘good’."

There was heavy disdain all over the word ‘good’ that set Bucky's teeth on edge,

"That can’t ever be changed. But mine? He’s the kind that changes everything. Even you."

While Bucky struggled to find a response to that (the words echoing in his mind, crushing him with their weight), Rhodes sighed,

"Get out, Barnes."

Bucky gets (the anger burned right out of him, a kitchen fire being suffocated by something much MUCH larger).

Pink light glimmers around Rhody's heart. Friday can’t touch him like she can touch Tony, but she can give him this (Tony's children were all vicious, loyal, and, ultimately kind. Even the human ones
were when it came down to it). He splays his hands over the light and breathes in time with its pulses (pins and needles stabbing distractingly along his back and neck).

"Thanks, Fri."

He says, burying his face back into the unforgiving metal of War Machine's shoulder. Being in the suit for so long had been a bad idea. It had put him in the wrong frame of mind to risk encountering anyone, let alone Barnes.

He hadn't even meant to take the first shot. He was glad it was just a warning. Barnes...deserved better than that entire interaction (the man was clearly struggling with his own issues, half alone in this compound, with a best friend that was even more of a mess than Rhodey's was right now).

"Hey there, gumdrop."

Tony called out, hovering uncertainly in the doorway. Shit, that meant Friday had tattled on him.

"It was for your own good, uncle."

Friday says, disapproval thick in her voice. Her soothing light flickers out (which is what he gets for rude thoughts, he guesses).

"Hey Tones."

He responds. Tony quickly makes his way over to him, pausing long enough to judgmentally stare at the bullet casing on the ground (it's Stark-Tech since it came from War Machine. Great, now Tony would be extra pissed).

His hand clasps tightly onto Rhodey's elbow, relieving the pressure placed on his legs and the pins and needles that had moved down to his hips (just on the border of where there was no real sensation at all).

"I'm fine, Rhodey."

Tony tells him, shifting so Rhodey could get an arm around the suit and one around Tony.

"What happened out there..."

He trails off, mouth pressed in a thin displeased line,

“It sucked, but it wasn’t anything like Howard. I was going to tell Steve not to touch me. He would’ve respected that.”

Rhodey scowls at his useless shitty legs and contemplates, not for the first time, just sawing the damn things off.

"Rhodey."

Tony wheedles,

“Look at me, c’mon. What’s going on in your head?”

"Can we sit down first?”
Rhodey asks, resigned to needing the assistance. The whole deal with his legs hadn’t chaffed this bad in months, but needing Carol to get him to Tony was just...it was just shit *(using the suit to threaten someone was almost worse)*.

Once they were seated, he unstrapped the bracers, sending them clattering to the ground as Tony's eye twitched in agitation. Thankfully, he didn't comment on it *(if he had've Rhodey is pretty sure he would've yelled himself hoarse)*.

"I know Rogers is 'show' not 'tell'. I know you would’ve kicked him in the dick if he kissed you. I know he would’ve agreed that he deserved it."

He admits, grabbing hold of Tony's knee and giving it a reassuring squeeze,

“'But I also 'knew' he wouldn’t hurt you permanently, and see where that got us?'”

Tony looks ready to interrupt *(a mutinous slant to his mouth that was oh-so-familiar)*, so Rhodey flicks him on the nose,

"'The thing with Barnes has been stressing me out. I don’t know if he’s trustworthy and I...Christ, Tony, I just didn’t wanna let you down that bad again.’"

A confused sound reaches his ears and Rhodey sags heavily against Tony's side.

"'I trusted your parents enough to let you go home even when I suspected he had hurt you before. I didn’t do anything about it when he hurt you again. I trusted Rogers in the same way - I KNEW he’d hurt you before, shut up Tony because emotional hurt still counts, but I thought he wouldn’t do it again. Then he did, and I didn’t stop him.’"

"Rhodey, we were kids-‘"

"'Then Barnes rolls in and I don’t trust him at all. He’s a fucking mess and he won’t leave you alone and I DO something about it. We all do. And what happens? You invite him in and he starts acting like - like a wet kitten in the rain that doesn’t know when piss off and thinks mice are a good way to get into your heart. Like he isn't dangerous. Then, while I’m distracted with his dumb ass, Rogers sneaks around behind my back.’"

"Rhodey, c’mon, none of that is your fault. It’s not your job-‘"

"'You’ve gone down in flames so many times, Tony. We’re getting old. And I’m...I just wish somebody would set their sights on you who wasn’t messed up. That we could have like...two normal friends other than Pepper and Happy.’"

Tony laughs. Surprisingly, it’s a happy sound. A genuinely happy one *(high pitch and squeaky, nothing like the one Tony used for the press or the boardroom, nothing like his half-asleep chuckles or the bitter sound he made when his face was still bruised and the indent of Rogers' shield was still in his chest)*.

"Pepper isn’t even close to normal,"

He says, grinning,

“'And honey, we haven’t been normal in years. Who else would join this circus?’"
“I know it’s futile to tell you not to worry about lil old me, sweet pea. I’m pretty sure it’s in your DNA - God knows Roberta worried about me.”

Rhodey grumbles, in a perfect imitation of his mother,

“Skinny kid wants to fight the whole damn world when he could get blown over by a spring breeze. I’m Tony Stark! More like I’m Tony Not-So-Smart. Rich people, by my word. They're gonna be the death of me.”

Tony shakes his head, a bittersweet smile on his lips (he misses Rhodey's mom almost as much as Rhodey does. It was an ache that never really went away),

“You don’t have to take care of me alone, though. We’ve got people now. Messed up people, but people. We’re good. At least that’s what my therapist tells me.”

Tony winds their fingers together,

"And I know my advice isn't the best, but I promise her word is gold. We're good, cupcake."

Like sand kicked up by a wave, Rhodey's thoughts take a minute to settle.

When they do, it’s with a whisper of,

“Oh.”

Because Vision watched over their room when it was hard to sleep.

Friday stood at his back as long as he was anywhere even a scrap of tech was.

Jessica Jones was even more murderous when it came to Tony's heart than he was.

Luke stood by Jess, no matter what. And lately Luke seemed more and more like he'd do the same for Rhod. So did Matt, though he’d never admit it.

Hope had been something of a friend for years, though she was closer than ever now.

Even Dr Strange came through when they needed him.

Natasha hadn’t earned his trust back yet, however she’d watched over Tony when he couldn’t be there.

Pepper and Happy couldn’t be there all the time, but they were all getting old. They were learning to make the time when it mattered (they called Rhodey twice a week. Him and Pepper got lunch once a month. Her entire legal team was at his disposal if he ever even implied he wanted them).

The kids...they would always be there. For both Rhodey and Tony (RiRi was ferocious in her defence of him and Kamala was always close behind her, Peter had begun to turn those starry eyes on to his achievements, cooing over the planes Rhodey had once designed-).

And Carol...he’d given her next to no details and she’d been there. She has BEEN there, silent support, keeping him upright when he’d freaked out.

She'd told him she always would be, gripping his shoulder tightly and MEANING it.
Oh.

The whole world wasn’t against them this time, was it?

There were people on their side.

"I can finally take a vacation. I’m gonna take Carol to Tahiti."

Rhodey blurted, closing his eyes and letting himself enjoy the shaking of Tony's shoulders as his best friend laughed himself sick (*like sand kicked up by a wave...he settled*).

It's strange, Tony thinks, to have to go around the compound reassuring the New Avengers of his safety after something so minor.

He hadn’t realized how tense things had gotten between him and Steve, or how the entire situation with Barnes had made it worse from an outsider perspective (*not until he'd seen one of his own bullet's jacket on the floor*).

He'd avoided the whole thing so thoroughly he’d left everyone to assume the worst. In hindsight, he should really apologize to all of them. In the meantime however, he’s having a late night snack and discussing the Cap-cident with Luke, Jess, and Matt. It had started as a serious conversation, but was quickly devolving into an argument.

Luke sympathized with Steve as a man on a mission to self-destruct. He'd been there before, probably too many times to count (*one day Tony would get Luke Cage's full story out of him, but today wouldn't be the day. He could respect the things Luke kept close to his chest, though the curiosity burned at him*). Matt and Jess were both seriously bothered by Steve's invasion of Tony's personal space, especially after his panic attack, and his abrupt confession. Jess sneered over 'love', winding her hand tightly with Luke's.

Tony surprises all of them by taking Luke’s side and awkwardly explaining that he’s been there with Pepper - he constantly clung to her while using her to reject himself at the lowest points in his spiral. He's surprised Pepper even speaks to him sometimes when he thinks of some of the things that had happened right around her brush with Extremis (*Pepper was always stronger than anyone gave her credit for, though. Strong and giving and too understanding for Tony to ever comprehend. He was grateful she'd left him before he could get even worse, before he could get himself killed*).

Matt points out that he’d never tried to kill or otherwise harm Pepper (*clearly itching to bring the law into this. Tony knew Matt had a restraining order drafted in his room that had originally been for Barnes. Tony wouldn't put it past him to just change the name*) and Tony just kindof bitterly chuckles.

Nobody really understands the mess that had been him and Steve. Not even Rhodey, who was heavily biased towards Tony here, no matter how fair he usually tried to be. They’d been primed for failure since the start - Howard had set Tony like a trap, Shield had done the same to Steve, and then the whole misbegotten world kept putting them at opposite ends of the same goddamn ideals (*freedom, justice, safety for all, god damn it*). They’d both stepped onto the field and sprinted towards death, determined to go out in flames before anyone else.

Steve clung to everything that fuelled that fire and burned the world with it.
Tony clung to everything that could pull him out of the blaze, dragging them in with him.

An answer (Steve, always believing his way was right) and a question (Tony, unable to stop doubting everyone and everything).

A tree planted firmly on the ground (that misappropriated metaphor Sharon had used, he’d never forgive her), gravity itself, and Icarus (foolishly flying despite knowing what gravity would do to him eventually).

They were two sides of the same coin.

One big fucking mistake.

At those thoughts, Tony takes his first drink since Extremis and finds it disgusts him. Jess ignites it in the sink, Matt lights his cigarette from it (the red glow reflecting from his sunglasses), and Luke bemoans the loss of good liquor as they watch it burn.

No more fuel for the fire.

Tony wasn't going to be flammable anymore.

Fractures filled with liquid gold.

Empty spaces awash in liquid light.

Don't ignite - **illuminat**e.

_________

Bucky Barnes lurks in his old rooftop haunt, staring unfeelingly into the abyss, long enough that Friday alerts Tony at 2am. He’s got the same angry gun-in-mouth expression he’d worn for ages after his and Jess’ fight.

Before, the face made Tony worry and watch over Barnes from a distance.

Now? Now it sent a frisson of fear through him that pulls him right out the door.

He lands on the roof less than a minute later. Barnes is huddled in a blue coat Tony has never seen before (it's nostalgic and he can’t quite place why, brain still sleep-addled).

"Tony...?"

His voice is so small. He looked like he hadn’t expected anyone to come after him (rightly so, Tony only knew because of Friday...well, well, well, how the tables have turned...ok no, this was embarrassing).

Barnes abruptly got to his feet, running across the rooftop before skidding to a halt a few feet away. His body strained like he was just barely resisting hurtling forwards, hand opening and clenching repeatedly.

"That’s my name,"

Tony says, giving Barnes a jaunty salute and a half-assed excuse of a smile (Barnes looked like Hell),
“Don’t wear it out.”

Barnes doesn’t smile back. Instead his eyes flick all over Tony’s body, checking him over for wounds despite 1) Steve and 2) Extremis.

Tony rolls his eyes and does a spin.

"Satisfied, Winter Worrier?"

Barnes does not, in fact, look satisfied. He looks antsier than ever. He draws a deep breath, then promptly looks ashamed of himself (Tony is surprised by how much he wants to just...wipe that expression away. He’s seen Barnes looking ashamed one time too many. He just...fuck, he just wanted the guy to be able to live his life, he guessed). Tony massages his temples,

"Ok, seriously. Can one of you tell me if I need to shower more often or something? You’re giving me a complex.”

Barnes blurts,

"Please do."

Before mortification floods his entire body and he curls in on himself. Tony is kindof...hurt? He took pretty good care of himself outside of the occasional workshop binge. His cologne was lightweight, pretty swanky, and added a certain spice to his overall mystique (or so he thought. Should he change it? Give up on cologne entirely when he lived around enhanced people? What if it bothered their senses? Some people were allergic to strong scents-).

"You don’t smell bad!"

Barnes continues in a rush, all the while looking more and more like he’d like to toss himself off the roof,

“But you smell like Steve and Colonel Rhodes and I’m feelin’ a lil threatened- uh, uhhh, just uh, please forget that so I can just step right over here and-”

Was this what it was like to be on the receiving end of Tony’s rambling? If it was, he didn’t blame people for needing a few seconds to catch up.

"Do THEY smell bad...?"

Tony asks because he’s honestly not sure where this is going. He had an inkling about Barnes’ smell-o’-vision skills, knew he used them to figure out where Tony was most often in the lab (the candy placement made that obvious at least), and had probably been more than a little stalkery with it before. Despite that though, he wasn’t uh...all that sure why HE smelled that strong. Though now it looked like others did too...?

"They smell bad on you.”

Barnes murmurs petulantly, driving his hand into his own hair and tugging harshly,

“I mean, shit-“

Tony stared blankly as Barnes had some kind of internal argument with himself before shrugging out
of his coat.

"Is stripping your usual solution to problems?"

Tony asks,

"Because I could get behind that."

Default flirting probably wasn’t his best trait, in hindsight.

Barnes wasn’t half-bad to look at, though.

And now Tony was looking at him from up close because Barnes was...pretty much mothering him into his coat (really slowly, like he was afraid Tony would kick him in the shins or something). Barnes was even tucking his arms into the sleeves like Tony was a preschooler on his first day of kindergarten.

"Is..."

Tony trails off as Barnes BUTTONS HIM IN, by Tesla's pigeon loving ghost,

"Is dressing me also going to be a solution to your problems? Because I like that significantly less."

This was turning out to be a weird day. The kind that Tony was going to pretend was a dream if he wanted to maintain his baseline level of sanity (he could practically hear his therapist sighing, spearing a little piece of almond cake and groaning, “Sanity. Sure, that’s a realistic concept where you’re concerned.”)

Barnes’ hand freezes while smoothing the jacket's collar and Tony huffs. He’d made it this far already, no point in stopping now.

"Don’t stop with the weirdness on my account, Buttons. Chop, chop.”

Barnes hurriedly finished straightening the collar and then awkwardly tucked Tony's hands into the pockets before stepping away, face completely scarlet (he was worrying his lip between his teeth. Tony liked this face a lot better than the mortified one. Huh, he was getting to know all the shades of embarrassed Barnes could be).

"I...uh..."

He’s peering at Tony from beneath his long bangs and the sight is too pathetic for Tony to bear. Magnanimously, he waves one of his hands (the long sleeves of the jacket flopping over his fingers in the most embarrassing way. Why was everyone around him so huge?),

“Go ahead and sniff me or whatever, Wolf Boy. Tell me if I pass muster.”

Barnes fidgets for a few seconds, before stepping in close and breathing shallowly. Tony stares at him, unimpressed because he’s seen Barnes do way worse before, suspected him of more because of Rhodey's distinct paranoia about wiping down the gym equipment, and the idiot actually has the nerve to laugh (albeit incredibly nervously). Barnes had totally sniffed him post-punching Steve. It wasn't like he hadn't done it before.

Tony lifts a hand and plops it down on Barnes’ nose, sleeve flopping and dramatically slapping him.
"Do I pass muster, Sir?"

Tony asks again, biting his lip at the star-struck expression on Barnes’ face (...cute).

"...Yes?"

Barnes doesn’t so much 'say' as 'question'. Tony glares at him. Finally, his hand sneaks up to curl around Tony's wrist and he takes a deep breath, eyes fluttering shut (huh, ok, Tony definitely didn’t smell bad. Or maybe the coat smelled good? Tony took a surreptitious sniff of the collar, but found it pretty much smelled like wool. Maybe Barnes was just super into that?).

"Yeah."

Barnes was saying, voice gone gravelly and thick (Tony's heart jumped. He kinda had a thing for deep voices. It wasn’t a big deal, ok???)

“Yeah, this is better."

His eyes just barely slit open, pinning Tony with a dark look,

"I’m all over you."

Somebody was going to have to call the kink police, because Tony’s stomach did a precarious little swoop at that and Tony was pretty sure that was grounds for jailing.

Tony makes an (incredibly quiet!!!!!) siren sound because his garbage brain has decided that’s the best course of action here (break the tension! Alert! Alert!!). Instead of having the desired and most probable effect of Barnes leaving him alone, the guy gets the same look on his face that most people do when a kitten sneezes.

It's totally unfair. How is Tony supposed to deal with that? Nobody should be charmed by the things that leave his mouth when he’s off-balance (or over tired, or has gotten too much sleep, or has had too much caffeine-).

Barnes' hand around his wrist moves, sliding down to his elbow in a loose grip that leaves Tony's hand pressed to Barnes’ chest. It’s warm, warmer than a normal person’s, and his heart beats strongly inside of it. The whole affair is weirdly soothing.

"You’re ok?"

Barnes whispers and Tony is startled to find that it doesn’t break the moment. Barnes isn’t...he isn’t holding him really, but he’s coming damn close, even if his grip is so loose Tony could break it with a single twitch.

"Uh..."

He swallows and notes how uncomfortably dry his mouth has become,

“Yeah. No damage done, Buck-A-Bye.”

Barnes hums, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Tony's arm through his coat, making the skin tingle,

“I still wanna punch Steve in the face.”
Tony snorts, and Barnes growls unexpectedly (sending a jolt through Tony's spine that ends low in his stomach. Oh wow, somebody really would have to call the kink police).

“I mean it.”

He says (like it was important that Tony knew this).

"I think the first time you decked him made that abundantly clear.”

Tony snarks at him, eyebrows flying up at Barnes’ displeased rumbling. He could feel the vibration of it through his chest.

"I think Rhodey threatened him heavily enough. Besides, Steve is...”

Tony waves one floppy-sleeved hand, noting Barnes’ tiny smile,

“Steve. Punching him hasn’t ever taught him anything.”

Barnes eyes him suspiciously.

“What?”

Tony asks defensively.

“You're surprisingly...”

Barnes’ mouth works for awhile, trying to think of a word,

“Not mad about this.”

Tony thinks about it, drumming his fingers against Barnes' well-muscled chest. Thinks about what his next session with his therapist is going to look like. He steps away, patting Barnes’ chest one final time,

“I'm pissed.”

He says,

“I’m so pissed. But I never expected better from him.”

Barnes recoils like Tony had slapped him, looking conflicted, but Tony rambles away,

"If I don’t trust you, what you do doesn’t matter. It doesn’t mean anything at all. Steve is this,”

He lifts up his forefinger and thumb, squeezing them tightly together,

“Close to being nothing to me.”

He drags a hand through his hair, accidentally swatting himself again with Barnes’ sleeves,

“I’m still pissed, though. It’s just there’s no point in inciting a murder in this compound. The Accords council wants you guys in working order and I’m not going to fuck that up. So I’m going to be an adult, crush my feelings, and go yell at my therapist instead of my coworkers.”
Tony tilts his head back and stares up at the night sky, letting the stars steal his breath *(panic singing in his blood and sinking its teeth into his heart - how did the words go? 'I summon to the ancient winding stair, set all your mind upon the steep ascent, upon the broken crumbling battlement, upon the breathless starlit air, upon the star that marks the hidden pole...who can distinguish darkness from the soul'),

“Besides,”

He whispers,

“'It’s time I started dealing with my problems on my own.”

Tony leaves, coat and all, before he can see the expression on Barnes’ face.

*(It’s fear. Because Bucky had heard ‘together’ before enough times to know what ‘on my own’ really meant)*

Chapter End Notes

Tony: Yeah Rhodey, we've got people :))))
Tony: People who will help YOU out since you're so stressed buddy!
Rhodey: *is stressed about Tony and about finding people who will help Tony out*
Rhodey: Yeah Tony, we've got people!
Rhodey: People who will help US BOTH out!
Rhodey and Tony: *high five*
Carol: I sense a deliberate misunderstanding on the wind...and it smells like Tahiti?

Bucky: I've had my own Tony for less than a day now, but if anything ever happened to him I would kill myself and everyone in the room.
Rhodey: *lowers gun*
Rhodey: You're alright, Barnes.
Rhodey: *lifts gun*
Rhodey: But he aint your Tony. I won't hesitate, bitch.

Tony's Therapist: ...Give me a quote Tony.
Tony: ...
Tony: *incredibly ominous line from A Dialogue of Self and Soul*
Tony: :)
Tony's Therapist: What smells like Hot Topic? Like when edgy goths are nearby?
Trick question - maybe, just maybe, you should stop bringing up the darkness in your soul-
Tony: It could be coming from Bucky's jacket.
Tony: He's the biggest edgelord I know.
Tony: I'm wearing his jacket by the way.
Tony: Maybe it smells like edginess and that's why he was so into sniffing it.
Tony's Therapist: *prays for strength*
This chapter.........is a SHOCKER! *thunder and lighting flash in the background*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When NASA first catches wind of a ship pinging Earth, specifically the US, none of them are sure what to expect. They notify the Avengers immediately, fear from the last invasion hanging thick in the air (though those aliens had never bothered to send a warning ahead of them). Some of them think it could possibly be Thor. Some of them think that, if it is, it might not be a good thing (he has always used the Bifrost before. Why wouldn't he now? Lately, change never seemed to be a positive thing).

Tony has a panic attack the second his friends' backs are turned. Extremis locks him in his armour and, fortunately, into all communication lines between space, Earth, and the Avengers.

Whatever anyone expected, it certainly wasn't Bruce on the line, especially not saying, "We come in peace."

In a tone filled with good humour. All it gets him is silence, Tony far too stunned (and winded...and terrified) to respond. Then, in that heartbreakingly unsure way of his, Bruce admits, "Tony...I missed you."

Because Bruce knew he would be listening. Bruce knew him better than most, but he was still unsure (Tony had once told Bruce he'd always have a home with him. That promise was on shaky ground now - he could tell Bruce doubted it).

Eventually Carol has to take the helm (the best hiring decision Tony had ever made, he swears. Carol might even be better than Pepper). She rallies them and the Air Force to intercept the ship. Steve's protests about Bruce's need for calm and safety upon landfall don't even make a dent in her determination (Tony hopes that Bruce doesn't Hulk out. Steve has a point, but Tony can't - he can't trust that friends were the only thing landing. He wouldn't risk it. Something was out there, it was out there and it was too close, too close for comfort, too close to everyone he loved-).

The ship is small. Tony still doesn't trust it (he couldn't get Extremis to free him from the armour if he tried. He wasn't going to try anyway).

Bruce steps out and Tony can finally breathe again. Then the breath sticks in his chest, because the tension in the air is obvious. Bruce's eyes scan the crowd, seeking him out, but there's a fully armed guard in the way and Tony is tucked bodily behind Rhodey, Carol standing at attention before them all (using herself as a shield for the more vulnerable members of their team). Bruce actually looks surprised.
The last time Tony had seen him, this wouldn't have surprised him at all.

It hurt.

It hurt to see that Bruce had been doing better since he left (while Tony had... Tony had...).

Thor, striding up the gangplank behind Bruce, seemed less surprised. But maybe that was because he had clearly been **changed** (Tony had always liked Thor, youthful arrogance and proclivity for violence non-withstanding. But now... it felt like he was seeing himself standing on that gangplank, trust worn thin but embers still there, barely surviving whatever had banked the fire inside). Even with a missing eye, shorter hair, and a myriad of other changes, Thor still had it in him to be a little shocked.

They had clearly expected to come home to a team, not whatever they were now (God, had there ever been a time Tony would've just taken them in, no questions asked? There had been, hadn’t there? Would've smuggled them into the country and made sure they were clean and fed, damn the consequences).

Their initial greetings are stilted. They’re confirmed friendlies by both Tony and Steve (and Tony’s technology coupled with old samples of their DNA, not that Tony would admit that out loud. Well, he would, but only in the coms for his team. The New Avengers would understand). Carol has the guard stand down, though the wariness never leaves her gaze. Thor and Bruce return to the compound with her hovering over their shoulders.

When they had first planned to return to Earth, Thor and Bruce had had some loose semblance of a plan. They were going to go to the Avengers, alert them to Thanos' existence and plans, and then work together to share the news with the world in a way that WOULDN’T incite absolute bedlam (they’d had their fill of that already, though Thor suspected Bruce actually wanted a little more mischief in his life. Mischief that wasn’t Loki-flavoured). They’d left Loki and Valkyrie behind with the Guardians, hoping to find some way to have everyone meet in the middle.

Now they weren’t sure there was a middle to meet in. Or a plan.

Neither of them knew anything about the political situation on Earth. They had no idea what to do with the obvious rift down the middle of the Avengers.

Diplomacy wasn't Thor's strongest suit, but they'd have to lean on it here. They'd have to fish for information to figure out who to talk to first (Thor sorely missed Loki in moments like these. His brother would know what to do, though the sight of his face would likely make this entire situation infinitely worse).

As always, Thor's first pick is Steven. The Captain was always steady in his regard and had never withheld information from Thor before. Additionally, he was a leader amongst men, calm in a crisis, and less skittish about space than Anthony.

During his attempts to pinpoint what has changed with the Avengers, Thor finds himself instead cataloguing changes in Steven. He is politely sidestepping most questions, his gaze skimming away and across the room to the back of Anthony's head. While he is genuinely happy to see Thor and Bruce, sympathetic to the hardships they had seen, they do not hold his attention as strongly as they should.
Shame swims in his eyes whenever Anthony turns his way (the Captain had secrets now. Too many, by all accounts).

Thor allows his attention to drift with Steven's. There are people missing (Thor has heard stories about Wanda from Bruce. He questions her absence, though perhaps her presence would be stranger based on what he had heard). There are many new people, too.

Colonel Danvers, or Captain Marvel as she had announced herself, held her head high above the crowd. Her presence was commanding, but she was military and the Avengers, to his knowledge, were not. She meets his gaze head-on but doesn't approach (almost like she is waiting for him to show his hand. She makes him nervous, no longer sure-footed in his place here, and he doesn't quite know why).

Another person who holds Steven's gaze (and thus Thor's) is a dark-haired man who alternates between hovering over Steven and Anthony. He never breaches the tight circle of strangers around Anthony, though he communicates with one of them often. A dark-haired woman, short and angry, has her hand tucked into Anthony's back pocket. She scowls at the man whenever he nears her (he seems to hate her just as passionately, jaw flexing as she places a delicate kiss just above Anthony's ear. His single hand drums out a pattern on his thigh next to the knife that rests there).

The next time the man drifts back over to Steve, the woman smiles victoriously. It's a dark look that disquiets Thor. What disquiets him further is the way Steve sags gratefully when the man returns to his side, almost like he didn’t expect him to (though the man fits there. Perhaps a little awkwardly, but Thor can recognize brothers when he sees them).

Clearly the source of the discomfort in the compound is Steven and Anthony. It shouldn't be surprising or as concerning as it was, seeing as they had quarrelled often before, but...

(Anthony looks younger, healthier, and Thor remembers long discussions on mortality. Humanity. A single line lovingly delivered; "Were not the gods forms created like me and you, mortal, transient". Something is wrong)

If Steven will not share what he knows, perhaps Anthony will be more inclined.

It takes hours before Anthony is alone. Thor hasn’t been able to catch his eyes past the sunglasses (deep dark blue, completely obscuring his emotions, reflecting Thor's desperation back at him mockingly).

Eventually, he manages to approach Anthony in the gardens (reminding him achingly of home-) to talk, and is startled when Steven's dark-haired brother appears out of nowhere to prowl right up to him. There is danger in the way he moved (a warrior who had gone too long without a fight).

“It would be in your best interests,”

He growls, disposition hovering uncertainly between a cat who is displeased to have been dumped in water and a predator on the loose,

“If ya talk t’ Tony indoors. In the company of his co-leaders. My company might not go so well for ya.”

The threat is apparent, though Thor isn't sure what he's done to deserve it. Steven had greeted him as a friend and, while Anthony had been somewhat unsure, he had not turned away from them either.
He had spoken to Steven first, but that had been public. Perhaps it appeared he had ignored him to place his request at Anthony's feet? Confused yet affable, Thor booms,

"Ah, yes. I had supposed Anthony had more power here than Steven - I did not mean to slight him, I had merely struggled to glean information earlier..."

The dark-haired man's expression sours further (if Thor hadn't seen it himself, he would not have believed it possible). There is a blade in his hand that does not reflect the light, impossible to see with normal human eyes.

Anthony makes an exasperated noise and cracks his neck (the sound like a thunderclap in the tense silence that had fallen).

"Down, boy."

He mumbles, waving a hand at the dark-haired man,

"I don't think you and the metal in your skeleton really want to tangle with the God of Thunder."

Ah, the man was enhanced. Mechanically, it seemed? Perhaps Anthony had built it for him, explaining the protective behaviour.

The dark-haired man shot Anthony a mutinous glance that said no, no he just wanted to hurt Thor, perhaps drive him off entirely. He had overstepped some kind of boundary - this wasn't just about protection.

Anthony pointed at the man's knife, then gestured aggressively at him to sheathe it. When the man ignored him, Anthony threw his hands in the air and spun back around to face Thor, saying,

"Rhodey and Carol are helping me run things here. There's been some...changes in leadership, primarily in the global powers that oversee us. You'll want to talk to the Accords Council about any matters of international security."

The implication that Steven was not, in fact, a co-leader sat thick and heavy between them. The fact that Thor had overlooked both Colonel Danvers and Rhodes was just the icing on the proverbial cake.

Anthony does not seem particularly offended, however. A king in his own right, the man never seemed to question his own power (his goodness, yes. His humanity moreso, perhaps more than ever now. But Anthony knew he had a place on top, a place of responsibility, and he had never shirked it during their acquaintanceship). He lifts a hand and sweeps off his deep blue lenses, eyes gone flinty and more serious than Thor had ever seen,

"If whatever matter you wanted to discuss privately involved space,"

He says,

"I will fight to have you heard."

He seemingly fights the urge to glance at the dark-haired man, his spine stiff,
"Through any means necessary."

His eyes shine in the near-darkness and Thor's breath catches. Immeasurable sadness swamps him - Anthony's gaze is electric blue, unnaturally luminous, and inhuman (Anthony had been mortal. Transient. Perhaps too much so). A moment of understanding passes between them, the sadness Thor felt reflected in Anthony's own eyes (Thor understood something he felt many others had failed to, had failed to since the moment an unnatural blue light had lit itself in his shield brother's chest. Being alien, he knew better than anyone what being human really meant to Anthony Stark).

"Even in this,"

Thor said gravely,

"You remind me of my brother. A shape-shifter, not by nature, but by necessity. You must alter yourself to stay in a world that attempts to oust you."

Bruce would have understood, but Anthony winces. The dark-haired stranger crowds in closely behind him, looming over his shoulder like the spectre of swift death. His gaze is perhaps more unnatural than Anthony's when it cuts Thor to the quick.

He apologizes swiftly,

"I meant no harm. Things have changed."

(So much. Too much to express here with a stranger in their midst)

Loneliness clutches tight around Thor's heart. Nothing in his life remained untouched (unchanged). It shows itself in his face, he knows this, but he has long since shed the cloak of pride, for it was far too heavy for one man alone (with a nation at his back he had carried it well. He would carry it again for Asgard, for what remained, but here on Earth he was just a man).

Anthony has never been quite shy with touch, not really. But now he hesitates. Still, he steps into Thor's personal space and brushes his fingers, calloused yet strange with the same softness the Captain regularly beat out of his, around Thor's eyepatch. He's close, however Thor thinks even with distance Anthony's whisper would still resonate in his heart if not in his ears;

"Yes, they have."

Many things have changed, but Anthony is still a king. A king and a mortal who had suffered pride, suffered arrogance, suffered the loss of legacy (dreams crumbling in his bare hands, a journey never completed, a wish for an end he could not have - they had often joked about The Odyssey, about epics in Thor's own home, and here he thought of them still; "Yea, and if some god shall wreck me in the wine-dark deep," that line had always made Anthony's eyes twinkle, a rich golden brew swirling in his hand, not wine but close, he always said it was close, for whiskey and wine would ruin a man, "Even so I will endure. For already have I suffered full much, and much have I toiled in the perils of war." And Thor would sweep a blade high in the air, loosing a battlecry that would make Anthony laugh as they both roared, "Let this be added to the tale of those.").

Thor catches his hand and keeps it on his face, memorizing the strange new feeling of Anthony's skin with his eyes squeezed shut ("Let this be added to the tale of those").
"It is selfish of me to request comfort."

Thor says, voice rough with the battlecry that his body wanted to loose but his heart no longer believed in. Quietly, he admits,

"It has been a long journey."

Anthony is guarded now. He has always had secrets and now he has more. He is a man who can risk no more than he already has, and yet...

He steps into an embrace anyway.

(Anthony is...soft. Has always been so. Had cut his teeth on desert sand and diamonds, but strip him down and Anthony was always soft)

(It reminds Thor of Loki at Frigga's knee. Devious, arrogant, foolishly allowing the world to rest upon his shoulders and cradling it close when no one but Thor was watching. Asgard was home and Loki...Loki had always been willing to give anything for home, even when it cut him off at the knees, forced him to kneel, and to change his face)

The dark-haired stranger bristles. Thor can sense the air around him thickening with restrained violence beyond the comfort of Anthony's body. It seems he does not wish to be ignored.

"Would you like me to call Colonel Rhodes?"

He asks, tone far more neutral than Thor would have expected by the storm brewing in his icy gaze.

Anthony snorts, mumbling something like,

"Unbelievable."

Before speaking louder,

"Small Fry already has, haven't you, darling?"

A voice Thor remembers as one of Anthony's children, taking her very first steps when Thor had heard her last (when Anthony had been mourning the loss of another, his eldest not in time but in maturity), confirms Anthony's suspicion.

The dark-haired stranger makes a quick hand gesture that All Speak acknowledges as rude, then deflates sullenly. He continues to speak to Anthony, but Thor takes no note of their conversation, too lost in affection, in the reaffirmation of the bond between them (the hope he could change the future, that he wouldn't have to watch another civilization fall).

Finally, Anthony pats him bracingly on the back and nudges him forward with a declaration of,

"C'mon. We've got a lot to discuss. It's time we head to the War Room."

Thor doesn't remember the Avengers having a war room. However, things have changed. Perhaps it is not all bad that they have, because a war was exactly what was coming.
When Tony leaves with a stranger (*a God, by all accounts*), Bucky doesn't follow. He has never entered the War Room. He didn't have permission. Instead, he clenches his fist and fades back into the shadows of the garden, hand twitching for a gun that isn't there (*parts crushed in his fist before Thor had ever gotten here*).

What follows doesn't surprise Tony in the least. He had read the writing on the wall long ago. Hell, he'd basically written it.

The Accords Council decides that they can't wait any longer for the Avengers Integrated Team to come together naturally. They'd fight as a unit if they couldn't manage to be a team. They were going to be out in the field, handling international threats so governments could focus on generating disaster plans as quickly and effectively as possible (*training their soldiers, producing new weapons, generating war war war while begging for Tony's hands to sink back into the blood he'd been scrubbing for almost a decade*).

The Council hoped that life-or-death scenarios would force a bond between them.

Tony hoped it wouldn't kill their best weapon against an invasion.

He hoped, though he wouldn't be able to control it. He wouldn't have any control over the Avengers at all, a thought that made anger rear its ugly head inside of him, insidious and crawling and near-reckless enough to make him threaten the UN and anyone who thought they could tell Tony Stark what to do.

He texts his therapist that a crisis has come up. She texts him back that every new day was a crisis, directly quoting him. Then she tells him that he has made his own round table, so he should trust in it, because kings and knights who didn't listen to good advice tended to die.

He wishes he could speak to her in person. He wishes she could be here at this meeting, however his therapist wasn't cleared to hear this kind of news, to make these kinds of decisions. He's going to be on his own (*"It's time I started dealing with my problems on my own.** How true that was becoming*).

The Accords Council along with the US government and just about any international diplomat who gave a damn about space agreed - Tony would be heading an Earth Defence Initiative. Rather, he would be heading The Extraterrestrial Defence and Diplomacy Initiative for Earth Security (*TEDDIES in his head - Barnes was right, he really was a teddy bear now*). He would be working with T'Challa and Thor.

**Alone.**

Rhodey would be taking his place as the Integrated Liaison for the Avengers. Bruce was...leaving (*"I need some space.” He had said, then laughed shakily, “Space was good for me, but things are tense here and I just...give me some time.” He had nervously glanced between Steve and Tony. Tony tried to smile, but it came out wobbly and wrong. He didn’t know what else he expected*).
Tony was taking it hard (where was his round table now?), but Steve was taking it harder. He was visibly rattled and, when he looked like he would reach for Tony and Barnes, Tony nearly reached back (years of ingrained instinct in a crisis kicking him square in the jaw). Steve's reaching drew short when he made eye contact with Carol and realized what Tony had the second the ship had breached Earth's atmosphere - Carol was grim in the way somebody already resigned to their fate was (betrayal never hit Steve any more softly, Tony noticed. It stuck to him and bled him dry in a way Tony was all too accustomed to. He didn't want to look at Steve right now - couldn't stand it).

She had worked more closely with their international contacts than anyone. She used to be a NASA pilot, kept close tabs on intergalactic threats, and...

She had known.

She had known that something was wrong, a guillotine hanging over all of their heads in space, and she had kept it a secret for the Integrated Team. She had never once mentioned this fear to them; of infinity stones and what they might attract from beyond their planet.

The New Avengers had known it was a possibility because Tony always had a project open to the side, one he would plunge into whenever the paranoia grew too large and all-consuming (a map of their solar system and beyond sprawling across his holo-screens, plans for telescopes, plans for satellites, a network that never stopped expanding). They hadn't been prepared for how soon it had come, however. They also weren't ready to lose Tony, their worried gazes falling upon him like grasping hands, despite his best efforts to pass leadership to Carol.

The kids are especially unhappy, but they are being granted permission to fight. They have to go. It's not like they could help Tony with his plans anyway (or that's what the Council reckons, though it makes RiRi's expression turn foreboding and Peter's is working its way towards true anger. Tony's worried about them. He's worried all the way through, like them leaving means they'll stop existing, like they were all just a dream. Too good for him to have for real).

There's nothing Tony can do about, though.

War is coming and he's never been a soldier.

While there's in-fighting, Bucky slips away.

He hasn't been cleared for the field though everyone else has (even the children, their young faces creased with anxiety in a way that wrenches his heart right out of his chest. He's seen that expression too many times, a lifetime away. He remembers the draft. He feels like it's happening again, but this time Bucky wants to go. He's already empty - what else could a war take from him that wasn't already plunging into it?). He can fight just fine (better than fine - the Winter Soldier was built for war), but he's down an arm and Colonel Danvers hadn't cleared his psych evaluation (despite the Council eying it with obvious interest).

He figured that was on purpose.

Bucky is proven right when she comes to his room. Colonel Danvers avoided him whenever she had the opportunity (she'd instruct him on the field, but personal visits were rare and often based on concern for his wellbeing. She didn't like or trust him), so a visit is suspicious. She doesn't leave him
"We need all hands on deck."

She tells him immediately,

"But somebody needs to take care of Mr Stark. He's one of our greatest assets here,"

He twitches violently at that word and Colonel Danvers' eyes fill with sympathy,

"And we can't afford to lose him. But somebody else needs to keep Captain America's head screwed on right."

Bucky isn't sure he understands - he isn't going with Steve. They hadn't cleared him (and that rankled, it burned and ate at him like acid. Was this how Steve had felt when he'd left for war himself?).

Colonel Danvers slumps. He's never seen her in any position but parade rest or at attention. She tugs at the collar of her uniform around her neck,

"Can I be frank with you?"

She asks. He nods, unsure, and she slumps even further,

"I had planned to leave Natasha here and to send you in with Steve. But Natasha wouldn't agree - she said it would be easier to pull off the reverse politically. The Council would argue for her to be in the field, but they can't fight your psychiatric evaluation, not with the team on such precarious ground already. Besides, at worst the Council thinks she fights for herself, while they remain concerned over your triggers and history of losing agency."

Bucky winces. The assessment was harsh but...accurate. He would've made the same one himself (eventually, once the yawning feeling of loss stopped punching him square in the gut over Steve going where he couldn't follow). He nods, desperately suppressing the strange urge to cry, and admits,

"Natasha is a better diplomat than I'd ever be. It's better for her to go if the team'll be crossing borders."

Colonel Danvers, no, right now she was Carol, wasn't she? Half-collapsed in his doorway and trusting him with Tony's safety, she was Carol. She eyes him like she can see straight through him and says,

"That, and if anyone was going to keep Tony assassination-free and in,"

She grimaces,

"Obsessively good health, it'd be you."

She clearly found it distasteful, but the anxiety in Bucky's chest eases a bit. He's not settled, not yet, probably won't ever be with Steve out of sight doing some dumb shit overseas where nobody wanted him, but it's...better.
When Carol leaves, Bucky slips away to Steve's room. He's waiting there for him, catches him in a hug where Steve tries to make himself small again the second Bucky slides through his door.

"I didn't think you'd see me off."

Steve says, raw and bleeding emotions all over the place like somebody had taken a knife to him. He's taking this harder than even Bucky has (foolishly, too, if he thought Bucky was just going to leave because of their differences lately).

"Always. I'll always come back for you, Stevie."

He croaks, choking back the urge to cry again and tacking on a cocky smirk straight out of the past,

"Till the end of the line."

Steve is getting all choked up himself. God almighty, they're going into another war right after he got Bucky back from the last one he'd lost him in. It's only been a few years for him, hasn't it? Bucky's worried all to Hell that he's going to do something stupid.

Then, taking the words right out of his mouth and right out of the past, Steve says,

"Don't do anything stupid."

Bucky knows how this goes. It's sepia-toned and strange, something that doesn't quite belong to him, but Bucky knows the steps to this dance, the words to this song. But Bucky also knows where it got him last time (injected with a jacked up super soldier serum and 70 years in the future).

He doesn't say the right line back (he wants things to be different this time - they're different this time).

His smile is pinched as he says,

"Meet you on the other side, Stevie."

Natasha enters the room then, dressed in that red and black suit from the time her and Tony had declared their newfound alliance, and Bucky can see that it's armour now. She would be leaving here, but she'd do it in Tony's colours.

He catches her elbow, eyes a little wild, heart thudding off-tempo in his chest, and begs,

"Take care of him."

Because Natasha was on Tony's side, but Steve needed somebody right now.

She observes him for a few moments coolly before finally nodding.

"I will. You take care of Tony, alright Yasha?"

She says, a Russian accept creeping in around the edges of that name,

"This situation...it's his greatest nightmare. If the Scarlet Witch rejoins us, which she will have to, it will literally be his greatest nightmare."
Bucky doesn’t quite understand, but he doesn’t need to. He knew his mission parameters: keep Tony alive, stable, healthy, and relatively happy. Keep anything that threatened that far away. Easy (as if - this would be harder than a lifetime of digging Steve out of the trash and fighting off guys three times his age).

It's inevitable that Bucky is eventually drawn to Tony's side like a magnet, especially now that he has permission to be there. He finds him on the rooftop of the east compound, virgin drink in hand, Vision sitting by his side on the hard concrete. They're absolutely silent and Bucky finds himself freezing.

Waiting.

"You’ve got the mind stone, Vision."

Tony says in a flat empty voice so unlike himself.

“Indeed I do, Sir.”

Vision responds in kind. He's never sounded more like an android. He isn't moving - isn't breathing.

“I won’t let them take it.”

Tony tells him. There’s a years old anger there. Tony is furious, holding tight to Vision’s hand.

“I won’t let them take you, Vision. No matter what.”

Bucky's heart is in his throat. There was history between the two of them, that much was for sure. History that had never been touched before, not like what they were doing now, not with Tony's knuckles going white with fear.

Vision rests his hand on Tony's knee, neither of them looking at each other, instead focusing on the setting sun. Finally, he speaks,

"I know you won’t, father."

Tony's breath leaves him in a whoosh, winded and wounded, and a million questions fly through Bucky's mind.

Vision pries Tony's fingers from his, patting the back of his hand gently. Then he phases through the floor and out of sight, but not before he makes eye contact with Bucky, face unsettling with half-formed emotions (body absolutely still - Vision had never got the hang of even trying to emote with it).

Bucky slides out from the shadows once Tony no longer sounds like he’s going to cry (breaths wheezy and asthmatic, making Bucky's brain chatter loudly about breathing exercises and cigarettes and a billion other stupid things). Tony waves for him to sit down (he’d known Bucky was there. He liked that Tony kept tabs on him. Paid attention to where he was - it made Bucky feel like he couldn't get lost). Up close he can see he’s got Bucky’s jacket slung across his knees to keep him warm and his dark blue sunglasses dangling from the pocket (it's good that they were off. Bucky fiddled with the
pink ones he kept clipped inside an empty gun holster - he liked Tony best in lighter shades, ones that let him see his eyes shining with proof that Tony was still alive, still thinking, still present and focused on him-).

Possessive pride warms Bucky from the inside out. In this situation, scared shitless and with war on the horizon, Tony is wearing his emblem (his brain immediately conjures up an image of the garden, Tony embracing the God of Thunder, but now he’s in Bucky’s blues, preventing Thor from getting any closer. His hands wouldn’t have been able to settle on Tony’s skin or Tony’s clothes. God, the image is almost enough to make him purr like a kitten).

Still, Tony looks lonely. He was going to be, Bucky realized (“On my own” echoing through his head, wiping away the rose colours of Bucky’s latest fantasy).

"You’re not alone, Tony.”

Bucky says.

“I know.”

Tony responds (voice even and giving absolutely nothing away, therefore giving everything away).

Bucky doesn’t really think he does know. He doesn’t think Tony ever will, not fully, not the way that Bucky knows.

Bucky wants...

He wants to feel him, wants to hold him, wants to press himself into Tony until he couldn't tell where either of them began, but he doesn’t know what Tony wants.

His jacket is curled over Tony's knees. It’s his, right? He can touch it.

Bucky slowly leans in until his head is rested on Tony's knees (a thought skitters through his mind. Curling up in Tony's lap completely, pinning him down, keeping him warm and safe and STILL - nobody could hurt him then).

“Is this bad?”

He asks and Tony's left hand is shaking as he adjusts his tie, flickering up to his face before he realizes he’d already set his sunglasses aside. The shaking doesn't steady as Tony mumbles, “No, it’s fine.”

Bucky isn’t sure if he believes him (not that he has the strength to move if Tony had've told him yes, yes go away). He isn’t sure Tony believes himself, either. But then Tony's trembling left hand settles over the fabric of Bucky's coat, worrying it between his fingers, and Bucky can't resist any further.

He tilts his head towards those anxious hands in invitation (a plea, begging, oh please, please-).

It's a parody of their first real interaction after Siberia. Bucky’s baring his veritable throat, inviting Tony to do something, anything.

He thinks a repeat of last time (Tony tugging harshly on Natasha’s hair, letting her settle against him, then moving away without any acknowledgement of the shivering aching thing filling up
Bucky’s body and tearing it apart) might actually kill him.

But he thinks of Steve, too. How things are different now - they’re different - and he hopes.

For once, the universe lets Bucky Barnes have something.

Tony's fingers sink into his hair, combing it back and moving in abstract patterns (sliding gently over Bucky's ears and making him shiver, pressing more heavily into Tony's legs, wondering for a second if the end of the world would really be so bad).

Together they watch the sun disappear below the horizon in silence, the only break being Tony's whisper of:

"I know that I shall meet my fate, so mewhere among the clouds above..."

Bucky doesn't say it, doesn't know how with Tony's skin on his, but he promises himself that he'll be there. He'll be there. Whatever fate had in store, Bucky was going to meet it with him, then kick it until it stopped moving.

The end of the world might not be so bad, but Bucky was a selfish man. He wanted more of this.

He was hungry.

Unsatisfied.

Chapter End Notes

Thor: Ah yes, Anthony deserves respect.
Thor: He is a king among men.
Thor: Though we have had our differences, ultimately I feel Anthony is truly trustworthy and underrated.
Bucky: Somebody is complimenting Tony...
Bucky: I don't need to defend him...
Bucky: Could it be...I can finally make a friend?
Thor: *touches Tony*
Bucky: Wow, actually, nevermind???? I have never made such an enemy before in my life??? I am???? Offended????

Tony: I'll protect you, Vision.
Vision: ...
Vision: Thanks, Daddy.
Tony: I'm disowning you.
Bucky from behind a wall: *slowly scratches Daddy off the list of names he can call Tony in bed*

Quotes are from The Odyssey and An Irish Airman Foresees his Death!
Director Stark

Chapter Summary

Bucky becomes the protagonist in every secretary rom-com ever, if the protagonists of those movies had knives and also were working for one of the most important men in the world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It only takes a week for Bucky to think perhaps Natasha should’ve been left with Tony after all. That or Bucky should have undergone some kind of training course. For several years. Or decades?

Natasha had experience being Tony's PA, however briefly. Bucky...Bucky doesn't know how she survived it. He doesn't know how anyone - wait, no, he does know how Pepper survived it. Tony was in love with her and also she is terrifying. Anyone else, though? Mystery.

Not that Bucky would give up his newfound position. It's just...

Tony is crazy busy and Bucky has a Hell of a time keeping up with him. He is one of the most dangerous people to have existed in this century, a highly trained operative, a ghost story...and Tony Stark's schedule might come closer to killing him than any of his missions ever managed.

The super soldier serum cut back on how much sleep Bucky needed, but apparently whatever Tony had done to himself did the same (and wasn't that just a nightmare? A Tony Stark who could stay awake for days at a time). When Tony was doing a bunch of crazy shit, like answering the phone on three different lines with his mind (which was incredibly cool, though disconcerting to witness), he got tired a lot faster. Even so, he was managing to pull under 4 hours of sleep a night.

He would probably manage less if Bucky wasn’t constantly present.

For once his stalker tendencies are working in his favour, though. Tony keeps disappearing, freaking out every staff member at the compound, but Bucky manages to find him every single time (he’d fallen asleep in the stairwell once, just a power nap fortunately, however he’d still given Bucky half a heart attack that resulted in Pan scampering around for a good hour afterwards. Thor has been irritatingly delighted, joking about “Cat Loki” (and revenge on his megalomaniac brother). Bucky even manages to find him when he's frustrated enough to go on short flights, spiralling high into the atmosphere and disengaging his helmet to catch a breath of thin air (Tony had felt awful once he’d come down to find Bucky's eye twitching over Friday's security feed of the whole thing. Not awful enough to STOP DOING IT though).

Tony works dangerous hours and with dangerous people. Bucky doesn’t like it - he physically has to drag Tony to bed after he gets over his 'first week at work' doubts. Soon enough, he has to restrain himself from doing it at the first sign of a yawn. He has to restrain himself from just dragging Tony away period, especially when the US government gets shiftier and shiftier with their requests of Tony, and the Accords Council starts wanting to keep more of their people in the compound (people Bucky doesn't have time to screen and observe and threaten).
There’s no reason to bring in more aides. **Bucky is there.** He's over his doubts and he knows that **nobody** can replace him. Tony is - Tony has secrets **nobody** else needs to know. Only Bucky.

Tony also has secrets that aren’t even his anymore (old demons captured in bottles, pounding at the glass as they suffocate). It makes Tony feel better to acknowledge them in roundabout ways that the Accords Council doesn’t need to hear of. Tony has...he's had enough of people judging him for things he has moved past (Bucky remembers old press releases he’d read, gleefully snapped photographs of Tony passed out on streets, vomiting his guts out, destroying his own home - God, the fact that those photographs existed made Bucky see red. Here was a man who ALWAYS answered cries for help whose own were ALWAYS ignored).

It’s because of Tony's constant need to check on his own demons that Bucky finds himself keeping an eye on the liquor cabinet for Jessica, sending her a photo of it every night (so she doesn’t come back to kill him in his sleep). He thinks, privately, it’s unnecessary, but Tony and Jess have their thing (like Tony not drinking meant Jess had more incentive to stop, but she had to pretend it was about keeping Tony on the wagon. Or maybe there was more there. That wasn’t something Bucky got to know, even when he was the only one here now).

Bucky inches closer and closer to Tony as he takes care of him (memories, sepia-toned and strange, threaten to drown him some mornings when he wakes up. There are children, sometimes a girl who looks like him, sometimes Steve all skinny and sick, sometimes dirty-faced kids lurking at the docks - Bucky is always carrying things in those memories. Items of care as he seeks to make his world a fuller place).

He makes food and leaves it in the workshop without a word. Tony gets snappy about being fed ("being treated like a child who can’t take care of himself" is what he takes it as, instead of Bucky feeding a man too busy to cook), but will thank him through Friday for the food if he just leaves it. It barely satisfies an inbred instinct in Bucky (he gets the distinct impression that Tony is a man who will keep giving him snacks, making him crave the whole meal even more. Those thanks make Bucky ache, a hot flare of hunger, and he has to slink back to his room for awhile to breathe through it).

Sometimes Bucky's inbred instinct (sepia-toned and strange) is more than satisfied, though. Sometimes it is filled to bursting.

Sometimes Tony will even drag himself to the kitchen and sleep with his head pillowed in his arms as Bucky cooks (knocking something loose inside of him. His heart goes a little wobbly and strange at the sight of Tony curled into himself in a patch of sunlight, sun-soaked and trusting as Bucky tries his level best to keep him that way. He kindof wants this forever. He also kindof wants to murder everyone keeping Tony up so late with a subtle and effective poison. Bucky is a complicated guy).

Thor often eats with them when this happens. He just appears a few minutes after Tony, watching him softly and sadly like he understands. Bucky doesn’t like him, doesn’t like the tiny literature references he shares with Tony (old myths and warriors tales mixed with poetry - The Odyssey is a favourite, “Sleep, delicious and profound, the very counterfeit of death” is a frequent joke between them that sets Bucky's hair on end) or the way he can’t keep his hands to himself. He also hates the electricity that sparks from said hands (bad memories clawing at his throat, taunting him) and the way it makes Tony's eyes glow brighter.

But Thor is also a study in contradictions: light-hearted yet morose, openly affectionate but riddled with wounds, always poking at Bucky though he was constantly surprised when Bucky snapped back at him. Bucky can’t quite resist feeding him, too (even if he does so aggressively, pointedly
shoving food at Thor whenever he got too cuddly with either of them. Thor seems to find it amusing. Tony just looks tired). He even hems that fucker's jeans after he rips them in some stupid training exercise (Thor's gaze rests heavy on him. He feels like he often did with T'Challa - small before the eyes of a ruler. He hates it. He itches to prove how little titles meant before a kingkiller).

Soon taking care of Tony's basic needs isn't enough. Steve always told Bucky he didn't know when to stop (he often told him that while Bucky was shaking down a doctor to demand treatment at a lower price, stealing fruit from the local markets, getting his teeth kicked in for the chance to have Steve last one more day).

What little he knows about mechanics is poured into Tony's charity (the one he made for him) as he scrambles to feel USEFUL and Tony scrambles to get everyone who doesn't WANT to be in the army out of it. He's been bitching to Thor about politics on and off all day, has riled himself but up good. He barges into Bucky's room hours later (something he is becoming increasingly comfortable with doing, though he still grabs Thor by the elbow whenever he tries it, still warns other staff from entering without permission) and rages about the recruitment efforts that have been creeping up all around him, the use of HIS NAME in some adverts. He snarls and spits as Bucky watches, fingers twitching for a gun, twitching for a reason-

And Tony grabs him by the collar, growling right into his face,

"Nobody is going to die for this planet that doesn’t have to. Nobody!"

He is sleep-derived and in a mood. Bucky is stricken by his conflicting wants - Tony is intense like this. Commanding. Fascinating. But he's also unhappy, angry, and won't let Bucky resolve that for him. Bucky wishes Colonel Rhodes was here. He would know what to do.

Tony yells himself exhausted while Bucky wrestles with his own thoughts. He finally falls asleep in one of Bucky's chairs. In the morning Bucky has to leave, has to go to the charity function, but...

He isn't willing to be gone for too long, doesn’t want to be away from Tony's side, so he does something he never would have tried before. He drags Tony out with him, hissing and spitting like a wet kitten. Tony is...surprisingly easy to corral.

Something shifts between them once again (he remembers being in awe in a classroom when he’d been young and school had been a luxury - continental collisions. Tectonic plates. The world was always changing beneath his feet even when he couldn’t see it. The concept had been incredible to him then, but now...now it was helping him slide his own broken pieces together).

Bucky wanted to be around Tony even when he was occupying himself as Director Stark, snappish and tired and trying his goddamn best. His brilliance shone brightly these days, building and taking command of dozens of the world's best professionals (astronomers, politicians, biologists, strategists, chemists, instruments of war and change and peace and hope-). He loves watching Tony at the top of his game. Loves seeing him strong and fierce and good.

Loves seeing the glimmers of the man beneath the title. Hell, he treasured every instance Tony let down his walls even the slightest bit. Craved the challenge of making it happen again. Recognized the mask that Tony wore and wanted, sometimes, to trade it with his own - darkness for darkness.

Director Stark ties his stomach up in knots, drives Bucky to action, feeds the tiniest morsels to the monster within.
However...

Tony is most at home, Bucky realizes, building completely average equipment in a clunky shop full of completely average people. He looks like the neighborhood mechanic (*hauling a car engine with ease, powerful arms flexing, while smearing oil across his neck and the arms of a tentatively hovering cadet*), while Bucky looks like a hero (*decked out in dress blues and fixing up the cleanest car they had*).

It's ridiculous.

It's...it's the most precious thing he’s ever seen.

Tony looks **happy** (*his laughter echoing with Colonel Rhodes, flying with his kids, and...had there been other times he’d seen Tony happy? Just in the moment? Those two times stood out so strongly, eating him alive*).

Bucky wants to **protect** this (*the wobbly feeling from earlier growing stronger, trying to take his legs right out from under him. He has to brace himself against the car for support as a kid, a dirty-faced child just like in his memories, grins at him cheekily*). He doesn’t want Tony to have to be the Director anymore. He wants him to go on Rhodes’ and Carol's ridiculous beach vacation with the kids. He wants him to go work in a garage somewhere nobody knew him. Where nobody could ask him to do anything above and beyond a normal person’s limits (*where his enhancements would just be a fancy way to use the Internet and not a way to keep himself alive and dangerous*).

He wanted Director Stark in hot moments of passion. Wants Iron Man in brilliant bursts of admiration and longing. But that?

He was pretty sure he’d want that forever, actually.

He's a man who has lived for a century. He knows what forever means.

Tony notices Bucky looking at him, eyes unmistakably soft behind his stolen sunglasses (*Bucky knows the pink tint makes him look gentle, lets the kids have an easier time interacting, while just barely concealing how often Bucky stares after Tony*), and doesn’t tense up. He doesn’t respond like Bucky’s unsteady affection is a threat or a hindrance. If anything, he relaxes further, slinging an arm around the babbling cadet who kept staring admiringly at his grease-stained arms while sneaking furtive glances at Bucky.

Tony is talking to the cadet about him, he realizes. Making the boy's whole face transform in awe. Making him look at Bucky like he hung the moon and the stars.

Bucky thinks of the jacket he still hasn’t gotten back and wonders if he’s finally made Tony feel **SAFE** in his presence (*over a month of feeding him, dogging his footsteps, hovering at his back at every single meeting...*) or if it’s just the fact that there’s an Avenger at his back that’s making Tony relaxed and present (*instead of racing forward into a future unknown*).

No. He needs to...he needs to calm down. Step back. Not fall directly into the open hood of the car he was working on.

Bucky shoots off a text to his therapist to query whether or not Tony has been to see his lately. He got the feeling Tony hadn’t been willing to justify the time spent on therapy, but right now he seemed...happy. Bucky didn’t really trust it (*and wasn’t that just the saddest thing*). There had to be something up, right? Something wrong.
He gets a reply that he can ask Tony himself and chuckles, toying self-consciously with some hair that had escaped his bun (the young soldiers all around him thought his hair was hilarious, clean-shaven as they were).

When he looks up, Tony clips a screwdriver to his jeans, making them slide even lower on his hips. Bucky swallows dryly.

As the night finally wraps up and their car arrives, a man named Happy grinning crookedly from the driver's seat, Tony seems like a completely different man. He settles into the car next to Bucky, close enough that Bucky can feel his warmth, and all the questions in the world just dry up in his throat.

Instead, something else topples out.

“You look good like this.”

Bucky says into the comfortable (or at least Bucky thinks so. Sometimes he still gets these things wrong) silence between them in the car on the way back. Tony looks at him, a sardonic smile on his face,

“Exhausted?”

He asks. Bucky fumbles for words, wishing he could articulate what he had been thinking earlier (he’d seen a photo of Tony once as a child with Maria. He’d obsessed over it for awhile, used it as a way of reminding himself that he was a monster on his worst days, as a way to imagine Tony happy on his better ones. They’d been on the coast of Catalonia, Tony gazing at his mother like she was an ocean goddess, dressed to match her in Carbonell aquamarine. It made a fantasy come to life for him now: Tony working in a garage on the coast, scraping rust free from salt-soaked cars as the kids played fetch with his bots, sunlight drenching everything and dying it with liquid gold and the aquamarine of the sea).

“No, no I want you to get some sleep.”

Bucky says, frowning. He’s nervous. He’s probably going to fuck this up, but...

“You look good doing normal things.”

Tony clearly doesn’t get it and Bucky’s a little frustrated with himself. He considers throwing himself out of the car, knowing Happy would probably ‘accidentally’ reverse over him and maybe put him out of his misery, but then the most amazing thing happens. Tony squints at him and says,

“Alright, I’ll get some sleep and maybe when I wake up you’ll make sense, Buck-o.”

And passes out on his shoulder (the one Tony had fixed up himself, the one Tony's hand tended to hover around when he needed Bucky's attention as if he didn't already have it-).

Bucky holds perfectly still, barely even breathing for the entire car ride back. He never wants it to end, but it’d definitely be inappropriate to ask Happy to circle the block and it’d be better for Tony's back to sleep in an actual bed (Bucky's bed, his brain blares loudly and repeatedly).

He's so deeply asleep that Bucky has to carry him in (Bucky is pathetically grateful to be able to drag this out, to keep touching, to keep himself grounded like this - skin tingling and anxiety-free). He can’t resist picking up his jacket from Tony's room (his his his) and putting it on, saturating it with his scent again (he wants to roll around in Tony's bed, press their bodies tightly together - safety on,
c’mon Barnes, the guy is asleep don’t be weird about this

Then he gently places it by the bed with a guilty twinge. He’d have given him something else to wear, something else that smells like him, but doesn’t know if Tony will accept more than one piece of clothing (and he needs this. Just having something of his with Tony had settled something in him, but it was even better when it was HIS. He’d been hiding it from his therapist as long as Tony didn’t seem to mind - speaking of which he had...several texts from him. Oh no). He’s frankly still stunned he even took one (trying not to read into it, trying to be good, trying to make sure that they were both satisfied-).

The next day T’Challa is in the compound, looking frankly exhausted. Jet lag is obviously setting his teeth on edge, because T’Challa is always polite, but he sniped at Bucky the second he saw him hovering behind Tony is the meeting room.

Tony looks aggrieved by both of them. He slept well the night before, but somehow it seems to have made him even more tired than before. Sighing, he shakes T’Challa’s hand and greets him with,

"Thank you for coming to meet me here, I know it can’t be easy to leave your country right now."

He shares a commiserating glance with the king (Bucky had heard him repeatedly mumbling about the Avengers being trouble-makers and how he pities everyone who is forced to deal with them on an extended basis. He has also bourn witness to more than one phone call with Colonel Rhodes, ones that made it obvious he was displeased with their separation. Tony had also told Thor that Colonel Rhodes got moody, that T’Challa called when he could to complain, and that Colonel Rhodes called even when he shouldn’t).

Tiredly, T’Challa attempts to regain his usual grace,

“"I understand completely why you could not come. Mr Barnes has not yet been cleared to cross international borders."

Bucky's gaze immediately locks onto Tony, who looks embarrassed ( he didn’t leave because of him? Bucky was...ridiculously pleased at the thought).

"I needed your opinions, that’s all."

Tony says abruptly (which, ouch, ok, don’t get your hopes up Barnes), drumming his fingers against the worktable. He immediately starts listing off potential attackers, species that Thor or Dr Banner had at least some awareness of, and their abilities, asking Bucky to list off ways he’d take them out.

Right, international assassin. This is what he was most useful for (sun-drenched days didn't exactly belong to him. They might, briefly, as long as he was here, but Bucky's life was always going to be stained in blood).

His mind goes sharp and smooth, answering everything with the utmost detail. However, the longer he talks, the more his body slowly melts into the table.

"Shit, sorry."

Tony eventually says. It’s jarring after the list of questions, said nowhere near as smoothly as those (with so much more emotion), and it gets Bucky to lift his head from where it had been pillowed in his arm. The tapping has stopped.

“S’ok, Tony.”
Bucky tells him,

“It ain’t hurting nobody. Makes you relax, makes me relax. S’nice.”

T’Challa slowly shifts his gaze between them, a sly grin beginning to grow.

“Say anything rude to him and I’ll skin you alive, King Cat.”

Bucky mumbles into the table, lazily thunking a wicked knife onto it (so black it absorbed light. Science was cool. Tony's science was coolest).

T’Challa stares at it in abject horror.

“No offence, kitten,”

Tony says, voice lilting high with suppressed amusement (beautiful),

“But that threat isn’t very effective when you’re just a Bucky-shaped puddle.”

T’Challa's horrified stare shifts to Tony instead. It is taking on a distinctly incredulous edge.

“Mr Stark,”

He says,

"This is the man who was JUST listing off ways to murder aliens. Very descriptively, in fact. He did that while he was a puddle."

Tony squints at T’Challa like he doesn’t understand the issue (good. Tony should approve - that was good). T’Challa just whispers,

“Oh Bast, you’re immune to him now.”

And looks suspiciously like he’s going to say something about Bucky’s research phase in Wakanda. Or his insistent obsessive check-ins with T’Challa. Or anything incriminating really (if T’Challa surveilled the compound at all...well, Bucky may have played with Tony's hair when he was asleep once or twice) - Bucky doesn’t like it. It's ruining the nice calm that had settled over him like a blanket.

Bucky flicks his wrist and sends the knife spiralling across the table, pointing directly at T’Challa, who grumbles,

“To think I ever helped you...”

Bucky fixes him with a belligerent stare that T’Challa matches perfectly. He starts to get up, intent on starting a fight (on proving who was boss around here), and Tony rolls his eyes.

He drums his fingers against his chest in a complex pattern. It takes Bucky a second to realize what the Morse is, especially now that it’s so deliberate and he’s so tired (slowly sliding back into his chair).

“Scruffy kitten thinks of nothing but murder all day.”
T’Challa laughs.

**Ruder.** Bucky would get Tony to bully him later for this. Maybe when he wasn’t so comfortable and they both weren’t so busy. And after Bucky shaved (*the scruffy comment wasn’t exactly wrong*).

"Alright Back to the Future, your exhaustion is beginning to get to me."

Tony says with a jaw cracking yawn. Apparently that gets to T’Challa, because he yawns too and looks distinctly annoyed about it (*good, Bucky thinks smugly*).

"Power nap."

Tony decides, getting to his feet,

"Reconvene in an hour?"

T’Challa looks like he’s going to argue, but an alert goes off on one of his kimoyo beads that has him stuffing it. Pink light ghosts around Tony's cellphone and Bucky smirks - looks like Princess Shuri was using Friday to spy on her brother (*he signs his amusement to her and catches Tony’s gaze flickering to him, appreciative and speculative. He preens. He’s been getting those glances more often lately*).

Bucky's more than willing to grab a power nap. He wishes he had've known earlier that the key to getting Tony to fall asleep was to basically pass out in front of him.

(*He should sleep knowing Tony is nearby more often. His dreams are soft, softer than they have any right to be, and the blood red he’s grown so accustomed to fades down to a softer pink*)

Chapter End Notes

IT HAS BEEN SO LONG ARGH!? Final papers had me like "what is the outdoors? I haven't left my apartment in days" and *is only capable of shitposting in the dead of night because shitposting takes less time than a whole chapter*

I'm pretty sure I span four new AUs out of the ether on my tumblr (purgatoryandme.tumblr.com) though which was like...something that took way more time than editing and posting the new chapter would've. Oops?

Anyway, things about this chapter: Cat Thor is a thing (a hilarious thing) from Squirrel Girl.

**Bucky:** I hate Thor
**Bucky:** *feeds Thor*
**Bucky:** He just pisses me off so much?
**Bucky:** *hems Thor's clothes*
**Bucky:** Like, what an asshole, amiright?
**Bucky::* tucks Thor in despite Thor's protests*
**Bucky::: I wouldn't piss on him if he were on fire
Bucky's Therapist: ...
Bucky's Therapist: Right. Yes. Hatred.
Bucky's Therapist: *eyeing Thor who has been totally swaddled at this point*
Bucky's Therapist: If this is what your hatred looks like, tbh I should be less worried about you than I am
Bucky: Also I pet Tony when he's asleep and rub up on clothes I give him
Bucky's Therapist: And there it is
Bucky's Therapist: The reason I am worried
Bucky's Therapist: So fucking worried

Edit: wow this chapter really needed editing and I am ashamed. Exam posts are bad grammar and capitalization posts.
Suspicious Activity

Chapter Summary

Bucky commits a B&E, Tony commits a B&E, and then some unexpected guests decide what the Hell, why not join in on an Earth tradition, and commit one too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If there’s one thing Bucky has learned in his last month of eavesdropping, it’s that Tony owns a shit ton of satellites for surveillance. More than any other person or corporation on Earth.

Tony calls them The Oracles (Sibyl, Pythia, Cassandra, Sambethe, Albunea, Lavinia, and definitely more that he had yet to mention), but whispers about the Fates when he’s with Thor. His hands always sweep out in these expansive gestures that seem to contain the sun and stars, the whole universe, with the way that his palms spark and glow. Thor makes them brighter as lightning rolls between every point of skin contact (and Thor was always touching, so Tony was full of lightning these days).

Tony doesn’t call them the Fates when he’s talking to Bucky (is it an in-joke or a secret? Bucky feels pathetic about how much he wants to KNOW. Sometimes he worries that Tony has forgotten he’s there, patrolling the fringes of the room).

The Oracles use whatever Tony has done to himself (to make himself more) to interface with each other. Each of them predicts different scenarios based off of whatever readings they’re picking up. They have some semblance of intelligence it seems, though Tony gets a complicated look on his face every time he catches himself nearly explaining them to Bucky (the secrets sting, though Bucky keeps his mouth shut).

Eventually he always settles on the same strange offhand line:

“They talk, they see into the future, but they don’t believe each other. In my heart, they’re all Cassandra.”

When Bucky looks up the reference (because he’s gotten used to how Tony talks when he's pulling from the heart), his stomach sinks. An oracle cursed by Apollo to never be believed.

Though, Tony acted like it was only referential to crosstalk between the satellites, that wasn’t the case. It was more. Bucky is beginning to learn, really learn, that things are always more with Tony.

How many times had Tony tried to warn somebody about a threat from space? How many times had he been shut down? Bucky doesn’t even need to guess - it’s clearly often (a traumatized superhero raving about armies in space, a superhero who can't even look at a drawing of the wormhole. One that went to a kid to talk about his anxiety - Bucky can see how people would spin it. How they would reason out ways not to listen to him. It's the exact way he imagines people will treat him, the way people from the Council who lurked around the compound DID treat him, when he tries to talk to them about...anything, really).
The next time Tony calls his Oracles Cassandra, Bucky catches his gesticulating hand (cupping the sun and other stars, glowing and sparking with lightning) and jokes,

“You think Thor could dropkick Apollo into the sun? Cause he looks like a yellow-bellied runt and Thor is...Thor.”

It's awkward. Not his best work at all - he'd stared at mythology links until his eyes burned and he simply gave up (these things were more fun when Tony explained them). His weak humour makes Tony glow, not at all the same way Thor does, but pink and happy and human.

Tony ducks his head whenever he catches Bucky staring after (following the crinkles in the corners of Tony's eyes and the amused slant of his mouth), though he doesn’t ask him to stop. He even repeats the joke to Thor later, who claps Bucky on the back so hard he slides right off his barstool (Thor makes sure to only touch against his shirt while keeping another hand braced on his own arm, rerouting the sparks that would otherwise fly. It's a thoughtful gesture even if he knocked Bucky to the floor).

What Bucky said wasn’t much of a joke. It had nothing on his faded memories, the ones where Falsworth was wiping tears from his eyes and Morita was howling like a hyena. It was also something of a truth, because Bucky wasn't one for the absurd anymore, not when his life was already so crazy (Thor was there to lend believability to Tony's results. He was there with legitimate first-hand experience, to put them in a position of power. Bucky wasn't blind - Thor was lifting whatever Cassandra curse Tony thought he was under).

Of course, one joke can't solve everything. Tony, despite his best efforts to share more, is still weird about his satellites (always avoiding eye contact, spinning some new pair of sunglasses in his hands). Bucky’s not really surprised. The more that people push, the more he realizes that Tony can't really trust anyone.

The Oracles tech is something of a secret, Tony's property alone, because everybody wants to put their goddamn mitts all over them. Nobody cares that Tony is acting as Earth's watchdog. They want their own predictions. Want predictions about what's happening on Earth, what their enemies will do, what people like Tony will do-

Bucky wonders if they'd be able to predict what he will do as the US government gets pissier and pissier about not being able to interact with The Oracles physically or remotely.

(Quietly, when no one is looking, Bucky steals an army general in broad daylight, whisking him into a room in the basement of the compound. He waves a pocket sized EMP in the man’s face, one that had been in the fucker's suit pocket, and makes him sing. He finds every single person that worked with him and breaks a toe. No big deal - easy to walk with even. But it hurts. It hurts and it's hidden)

(He feeds the information to Friday so she can arm herself against further attempts to infiltrate her systems or Tony's house - Bucky's home)

(Bucky haunts the man’s house at least once to make a point. He makes sure to show up on the properties of everyone he suspects of ordering something so fucking stupid, too. He does it even though he doesn’t like being away from the compound for too long. Tony looks at him funny whenever he gets back, like he knows he's done something, though Bucky always washes the blood off long before he lets himself brush his fingers against Tony's wrist)

(He finds himself taking Tony's vitals after every attempt. Tony hasn't had a perfect heartbeat in front
of him for awhile. The irregular jumps when Bucky touches him are soothing.

The US government can't touch Tony's tech, so when something sets off his satellites, they know it isn't human in origin (Tony had looked at T’Challa, hoping it'd be Shuri, but he'd shaken his head the slightest fraction. Wakanda's tech was an even more closely guarded secret than Tony's).

Bucky wants to laugh at Tony calling them the Fates now. Laugh or snarl. Fucking FATE - he really was going to kick it until it stopped moving. Thor would probably help at this rate (even though he seemed to think Fate was a group of real scary ladies).

The surveillance is alien. It begins to whisper around Tony's tech. Their predictions are warped into clean slates that no longer assume any threats are nearby. It’s ironically obvious something was within their solar system.

They can’t do anything about it yet, but it makes Bucky twitchy (he always washes the blood off first, but the next time he has to go out cranking the heads of would-be conspirators, he finds himself longing to return with stains under his fingernails and a blade between his teeth like a rose. He wants Tony to know somebody is taking care of him, that SOMETHING is taken care of. He wants to see those eyes glow with satisfaction, wants to be taken care of himself, cleaned and put away properly like any weapon should-).

His therapist doesn’t advise him about aliens. Instead he lets Bucky rattle off mission reports (senators, soldiers, and foolish men all looked the same in the dark, but Bucky had their fearful faces emblazoned in his mind all the same. Mission Report: April-), a bitterly frustrated look on his face, and makes him a damn fine pot of espresso. He tells Bucky that he doesn't need to step back onto the battlefield, not yet, but Bucky knows the war isn't over. Not this one, at least.

He’ll have to settle for being human when the sun was up, then thumbing at the safety as it set (carrying Tony off to bed with the hands of a killer, dragging his thumb over his lips before wrapping it around the stock of a gun).

He's taken to glaring at the night sky like it has personally offended him and gluing himself even more firmly to Tony and Thor both, lurking silently (becoming a shadow... a ghost once again). He stops talking. He doesn’t even respond when Tony tries to tell him to piss off (“Barnes, Christ on a cracker or some really burnt toast, LEAVE ME ALONE! You can't keep appearing out of the mist like some kind of Eldritch horror! I have a heart condition!”) and eventually Tony comes to just barely tolerate Bucky’s presence outside his shower door and at his bedside (he even concedes with minimal complaining that Bucky needs sleep, too, perching on Bucky’s bed as Bucky himself slept tucked beneath it. Tony had refused to stay in the hidey-hole underneath point-blank. His hand hangs low though, letting Bucky grip it until he falls asleep. Bucky wakes up sweaty and hard and WANTING and they agree not to do it again, though there's a look in Tony's eyes that suggests he knows that's a lie).

Tony's name is all over those satellites, as is whatever he had done to himself - Extremis (Tony had told him all kinds of things when he had curled up with his shame under the bed. Had appealed to the machine in him when the human part of him was out of sorts. That sort of understanding, the kind they were both beginning to pretend they didn’t have...it was getting dangerous) is pressed into them like a signature. If anybody wanted to know who was watching over Earth, they had their answer right there.

Their agreement to stay apart during those vulnerable hours between midnight and dawn falls short when Bucky still can’t sleep a week later, rattling out of his skin, debating the worth of firing another nuke into space, of putting Tony into a bunker, blocking the door with Thor's considerable bulk and
his stupid hammer, and saying fuck the Accords, fuck the world, **fuck it all.**

The stress from getting a wink of sleep only to get no more finally convinces him to start talking again, though the sentences are clipped and short. Rude. Caustic, even.

He won't even look at Tony (the animal is his skull is ramming at it more and more often, whining and scratching, and Bucky can't talk to his therapist about it because he knows he'll tell Bucky to take some time to himself and he can't DO THAT-).

Bucky snaps at Thor one too many times, regret stinging him as this massive man, a KING, hunches in on himself. It's what finally makes Tony lose the last fraying ends of his patience.

He angrily locks Bucky out of his own room and works in there for hours, driving Bucky half-crazy with the prolonged silence (Thor sits with him just outside the door and he hates him for it. Hates how Thor has been wriggling under his skin lately. Bucky has been shitty to him, mistrustful after so many people mistrusted him, but here Thor was. Relaxing and the closest thing he had to a friend right now).

When Tony finally opens the door, his arm shoots out to seize Bucky immediately, hauling him inside with the strength of the armour as Thor shouts in surprise.

Once the metal flows back under Tony's skin, Bucky can see he's wearing Bucky's clothes. Bucky's bed has been unmade, Tony's shirt was jammed into the hidey-hole, there's some kind of blanket nest on the floor, and there's a pot on some creamy white drink that reminds him strongly of the last time Tony had actually made him something (seduction coffee, drumming lightly on the tabletop). It's...it almost sepia-toned (Steve never used to keep their apartment clean before the army-).

Tony places his hand on Bucky’s chest and taps against it, an insistent rhythm of I-L-L-U-M-I-N-A-T-E that Bucky has been chanting in his own head for days.

Tears of frustration prick at his eyes at their synchronicity. He doesn't want...he doesn't fucking WANT -

They're both worried. All the time. Always needing to try and-

He wants to stop. He doesn't want to be THIS anymore, something that needs to be leashed, he wants to let go but he can't afford it-

He'd always wanted to be more, but lately it's like less is all he can be, all he can feel, anxiety pulling him in and in and in unspooling everything bridge he's built out of himself-

A crushing mass, a singularity, a black hole condensing him out of existence-

**Consuming everything**-

He doesn't want-

Tony is pushing Bucky backwards towards the bed, eyes bare, brilliant and luminous in the low lighting, and expression focused. Focused on Bucky. Pulling him out of himself (a black hole that's noticed the brightest thing in the room, please-).

The backs of Bucky's knees hit the mattress and he folds like a wet sheet of paper. Tony's hand is warm on his chest, his fingers tapping short starbursts of sensation into it.
“W-wha-“

He tries to ask, but Tony's fingers glide up to tap at the hollow of his throat and it silences him (his pulse leaping beneath those fingers like even his heart wanted the chance to touch, to be sure he was ok-).

“Go to SLEEP, Barnes.”

Tony growls, his own voice scratchy and rough. Had he been crying in here...?

Bucky is unbelievably flustered and no amount of tapping is going to change that. All of his stuff, the bed Tony expects him to lay on or the hidey-hole he expects him to go to, smells like Tony. It’s good. God, it's GOOD.

Tony had been...had been sleeping in his bed? Pressing his tear-stained cheeks into the pillows? What an image that made.

“You can roll around in the sheets, Christ,”

Tony says, looking about half as embarrassed as Bucky feels (half-hard already, close to begging, sweet Jesus),

“That’s what I did, ok? I’m not going to judge you for it. Just - just go to sleep. You’re driving me crazy.”

Bucky swallows, mouth gone dry as dust. Tentatively, he presses his face into his pillow. It’s good, as relaxing as it is arousing (Tony's scent all over him, blending with his), but Tony is right there, and Tony is getting used to this. Was tolerant of it.

It felt like he was Stockholm syndroming him-

“Why's it.”

Tony drawls (a hint of frustrated false-Brooklyn making a liquid shiver pass through Bucky's whole body) grabbing the creamy drink for the bedside table and stirring it aggressively,

“That whenever I give ya permission to do something, ya get all shy?”

“You shouldn’t have to accommodate me.”

Bucky mutters, edging closer despite himself (he wants to touch. He wants to reassure himself that Tony feels better. That things are better, even if it’s only for a second). Tony thrusts the drink at him, looking away. There’s the beginnings of a flush at the tips of his ears that Bucky aches to run his tongue over (fuck, stop, inappropriate conflicting thoughts).

“You’ve been accommodating me, Bourne Identity. And you don’t...”

Tony thrusts the drink at him again. Bucky takes it and watches carefully, heart beating unsteadily in his chest, as Tony covers his face with his hands,

“You don’t ask for much. Or anything. I’m rich, I give people things, but you don’t want THINGS-“

Tony's voice is getting weaker. Sometimes Bucky feels like two people. Right now for instance, the
man who fought in WWII is knocking on his breastbone in time with his breathing, putting words in his mouth,

“I want you.”

He says. It's true - it's probably one of the only things Bucky is confident of in this new world.

Tony's ears are definitely red, and it’s a damn crime that his whole face is hidden by his mechanic’s hands. He makes a sound that’s starts out reluctant but comes out the other side...almost pleased?

It keeps Bucky talking, despite knowing better than to do this (he's not in WWII anymore).

“I want you happy.”

Bucky blurs, clutching whatever drink Tony made for him like a lifeline,

“Doing stuff in the shop. Being a grease monkey. Just-“

He doesn’t really know how to finish that. Because he’s a liar if he says that’s all he wants. He also wants Tony here in his bed, unsure but trying to help. He wants Tony building satellites and scaring him out of his wits, too. He wants Tony angry and sad and smiling and fucking his brains out. He wants TONY.

It’s a...it’s a lot ("You think you love Tony?" Rhodes had asked him. He'd said that it was terrifying - loving Tony. Bucky...isn't sure that's where he's at yet, but he's scared. He's scared and he's damn close).

“Drink, DRINK already, Jesus, I made that for you to relax, not for you to attempt to physically manifest your stress in.”

Tony grumbles, sneaking a glance at the mug Bucky is caressing with his thumb. Bucky continues to just hold it, watching Tony, stroking his thumb across it like he sometimes manages to do on Tony's arms or hands (when he’s being weirdly tolerant of touch after Bucky’s been away, letting Bucky close the distance between them with barely a side-eye), and is rewarded by his expression coming undone.

It leaves him breathless.

Sometimes Bucky wants to trade masks with Tony, darkness for darkness, but this face? He never wants to see a mask on it again. All of Tony Stark's walls are crumbling and it's beautiful.

Tony is...really something when he’s flustered.

Vulnerable...soft, like he’s never been a creature of hard edges and sharp points. Never tucked himself away in armour.

“You don’t ask for anything.”

Tony repeats himself, Adam's apple bobbing as his hands twist Bucky's sheets,

“But we’re in this together and-“

He gestures again for Bucky to drink, gaze falling anywhere but on him, and so Bucky cuts him
some slack (*the drink tastes a little like rice? Strange*). He can feel Tony's gaze on him when he says,

“You’re alright, Barnes. You’re...something else. Been keeping me from...yeah.”

Tony fidgets with the edge of the t-shirt he’d stolen from Bucky. It’s an Iron Man one - machine-washed dozens of times to make it thin and soft. It'd look good underneath Bucky’s jacket.

“I named the stupid space force TEDDIES.”

Tony suddenly admits, apropos of nothing, and it startles a laugh out of Bucky right as he’s taking a drink. He chokes, then guffaws, just barely avoiding sloshing himself with whatever Tony had made (*rice and cream and spices? Like a drinkable rice pudding*).

“You didn’t.”

He states incredulously. Tony gets this tiny little smile on his face, one he usually reserves for his bots or Rhodey but never EVER for Bucky.

It knocks the wind out of his lungs all over again (*he was beginning to feel like Stevie, skinny little asthmatic in front of a pretty face*). His skin feels too tight for his body, like he’s going to explode right out it, but there’s also that yawning aching emptiness inside of it.

Tony is in his room, in his bed, in his clothes.

Tony was trusting him.

God, he was so sweet for him-

(Safety on, illuminate)

He takes a minute to brace himself, willing down the rush of emotion and the uncomfortable hardness between his legs, and surprisingly, Tony allows it (*is it all that surprising, Barnes? He’s been soft on you lately, been there every single time you’ve gotten out of joint, been putting you back together*). When Bucky finally feels like he can look at him again, Tony drums his fingers against the mug, just a millimeter from Bucky’s hand.


There’s a shy little curve to Tony's mouth.


Bucky wants to tuck his heart right into it. To keep it there forever. If that smile went away his heart would fall right to the floor.


Tony's off-hand was settled on his knee, stroking in gentle circles.


He was humming some song under his breath.

Soft and sweet and familiar.

*In the blue of evening*

*While crickets call and stars are falling*

*There 'neath the midnight sky you'll come to me*

I-L-L-U-M-I-N-A-

Tony's hand stutters as Bucky entwines their fingers. He finally feels himself breathe, filling up the emptiness inside of himself, and he's still **hungry**. He's still hungry for something, but he's breathing, he's breathing and he's stable and...

And he's **safe**.

_________

Tony slips out of Barnes' room once he’s sure he’s asleep. He meets Thor at the door (*he'd probably been there the entire time, waiting patiently for them to resolve their spat. Heh, he had the patience of a God*). There’s a light of understanding to his expression Tony doesn’t want to acknowledge. Whatever he’s doing with Barnes - he doesn’t want to think about it.

He wants to think about the universe instead.

Thor goes with him easily enough, a reassuring presence at his shoulder, and they stargaze while they plan how to save the world.

Dante said *'do not be afraid, fate cannot be taken from us, it is a gift'*. But gifts can be refused. Rejected. Tony is more inclined to Henley's interpretation instead, one he tells Thor even as he feels another strange ripple pass through his network,

"*It matters not how strait the gate,*
*How charged with punishments the scroll,*
*I am the master of my fate:*
*I am the captain of my soul."

They're going to the save the world or Tony will burn it all to a crisp, rise from the ashes, and try all over again (*he's not flammable anymore - don't ignite. Illuminate*).

_________

A full 24 hours pass before Bucky wakes up in working condition. By working condition, he means he wakes up thinking about the fact that Tony's name is splashed all over those goddamn satellites and this compound and-

Well.

He wakes up **PISSED**.
Stubborn stupid punks, every single goddamn idiot he gets involved with-

He'd been too rattled before, too careful of Tony to fight him. But now? Hoo boy, they were gonna have it out now.

He tracks him down, takes one second in the doorway to admire the way Tony looks yelling at a bunch of people (he doesn't care who at this point), then he drags him to a private room. They argue in a full-on knock-down drag-out fight.

It starts with,

"This place is too obvious. Anybody can find you here!"

And,

"That's the point - PEOPLE need to be able to find me!"

And ends with,

“I’m supposed to be keeping you safe!”

Before Tony's furious roar of,

“I’m supposed to keep this planet safe!”

It doesn’t go anywhere. Tony is a stubborn sonova bitch and Bucky is nearly as hard-headed. Still, Bucky's always been crafty, always had to be when he lived with somebody like Steve. So he leaves to go get Thor when Tony demands he fuck right the Hell off back to Russia.

He's in the middle of presenting his fears to his new friend, wheedling him onto his side. He's saying,

"Things NEVER go this well for this long in our lives. Something bad is bound to-”

When pink light shimmers over his hand. Friday is grasping at him even though she knows he can't feel it. She's...panicking.

No.

“Sirs, please, I don't know what to do. Boss is missing.”

And that’s when it all goes to shit.

Chapter End Notes

**Thor:** *raised eyebrows*

**Tony:** It's not a big deal, big guy

**Thor:** *wiggles eyebrows*

**Tony:** Just because I went to his room and rolled around in his bed-
Thor: *eyebrow wiggling intensifies*
Tony: And wore his clothes and touched his pecs-
Thor: *eyebrow wiggling stops in disbelief*
Tony: And held his hand while he slept-
Thor: *jaw dropped, unable to process what is happening*
Tony: And also totally ignored his massive boner
Thor: *smashes head into the wall*
Tony: Does NOT mean we're a thing! Gosh, Thor.

I! AM! SO! EXCITED! FOR! THE! NEXT! THREE! CHAPTERS!

There's a snippet fic of the scene where Tony and Bucky share a room for the first time at: http://purgatoryandme.tumblr.com/post/173210999828/between-scenes
Chapter Summary

Tony is cast as an extra in an 80s sci-fi film. It's not a role he wants. He's calling his agent.

(Gore TW)

Chapter Notes

Waking up is the worst experience Tony has had in recent memory. He’s never been a morning person, but THIS morning was really taking the cake (and shoving it down the garbage disposal, ugh, had he been hit by a truck? Wait-).

He’d been electrocuted last night. Only, that wasn’t quite right. Tony couldn’t be electrocuted, not really, not without dispersing and dissipating the energy throughout his skin and into the alloy lining his bones-

What had happened? It definitely felt like he’d been electrocuted. His skin still smelt like he had, too (toasty and awful).

Extremis and the nanobot network should have-

Oh fuck.

Oh, COME ON.

Something had slipped past all his defenses last night. Slipped past the compound’s outer monitoring network, past Friday, made its way past BARNES, by all that is sacred in the superhero community, which was absolutely unbelievable (Barnes was a master assassin and bodyguard. Near-impossible to fool, to fight, to distract - oh wait, Tony had done that himself. Shit). They only way something could pull that off, could spoof all of his systems AND whatever monitoring technology Barnes had put up (he always gave Tony a ‘butter wouldn’t melt in my mouth’ look, but he wasn’t a moron. Barnes was paranoid on the best of days and an extremely talented stalker. He had to have some tech), was to copy Tony’s signature.

Specifically, his technological signature.

Which was imprinted into his Oracles.

Idiot.

He was an idiot. An absolute-

Something had copied Extremis, reverse-engineered its signal, clearly had REVERSED it completely because Tony couldn’t do fuck all with the connection between his nanobots and the
virus, shit, shit, something-

Why was he even thinking ‘something’? He knew exactly what was going on here.

He’d been kidnapped by aliens. It’s the only thing that made sense (humans thus far had utterly failed to copy his technology, those who had come closest to succeeding didn’t want him dead yet, and honestly? He was pretty sure it didn’t matter how smart someone was – if they were a person, Barnes would murder them. Tony was at least 50% certain Barnes had been doing some ‘wetwork’ on the side. He was 71% certain Friday was helping and Butterfingers had disappeared from the lab TWICE and been returned with traces of hemoglobin in his wheels. Nothing human was going to manage to touch Tony).

Aliens are the only logical answer, but Tony can’t fucking BELIEVE it.

Abducted like a bad sci-fi flick. He was living out the Fourth Kind right here right now. The Raelians would lose their shit if they ever found out. The last alien visit had finally convinced some of them that aliens weren’t all that into visiting Earth subtly, but here he was, imagining the smug face of that Ancient Aliens guy-

By Curie’s irradiated ghost, he’s genuinely insulted his abduction was as easy as it was. All it had taken was both Thor and Barnes being distracted, TONY being distracted, excellent cloaking technology, an Extremis mimic, a jolt of electricity…ok, so it wasn’t that easy, but Tony was still offended.

He was going to make Friday impossible to overwrite. Enjoy full autonomous AI, world, because his daughter was never going to be shut down like that again.

Fuck, he was also pissed that they’d nabbed him right after his first real argument with Barnes. It had been refreshing. And distracting. And now he felt real shitty about it because Barnes had been right.

Ugh. Kidnapped by ALIENS.

How had they even known how much electricity to use to override his fail-safes beyond just Extremis? How long had they been watching him? Watching the people around him? Nobody but himself, Helen, Vision, and Rhodey knew what was in Tony’s body besides the nanobots. No one but Tony know about at least two ‘extras’.

He’d been avoiding a lot of people he knew because he’d been worried about this. About surveillance and other, less protected people, being targeted.

Hell, Tony had avoided both Pepper and the company during this whole space debacle. Though that was mostly protection against government stooges instead of aliens.

It had been pointless, because he’d been kidnapped by aliens all by his lonesome and Pepper was probably going to come to space to murder him herself before the aliens got to her, too. Ugh, fuck, his chest felt like it was being crushed.

Tony leaned back against the wall of his cell and struggled to get his breathing under control. He could feel Extremis boiling in his veins, present but cut off, and desperately tried to uplink to something (anything). He felt the nanobots in blood stutter a bit, the ones that were directly bound to the virus probably, and his heart rate slowed by force. His breathing regulated by force.
Huh, so he could still control some parts of his body at least. Not everything was shot to shit.

Not that it would save him when Pepper came for him – he hopes Rescue deployed and went to her. The emergency protocols weren’t really meant to handle him getting spirited away with Extremis on the fritz, but Friday should be able to do something with them. If she was ok. He hoped she was ok.

He could use a Rescue. Somebody to cover his back.

He hoped somebody was covering Pepper’s back, too.

…

Oh shit, Barnes was going to flip, too. Speaking of people who would come to space to ruin his face, Barnes was probably number one on the list (he could picture Barnes’ worried face perfectly. He’d seen it dozens of times now. His eyebrows would furrow just so, those full lips tilting down in displeasure, the intensity in his eyes burning Tony to a crisp. Barnes was going to be a lot more worried this time).

…

And Rhodey. Oh God, Rhodey. Rhodey was never going to let Tony out of his sight again. He’d probably attach them at the hip no matter how many Human Centipede references Tony made (he wouldn’t even make any. He’d left Rhodey alone too many times to count. Always getting taken and leaving his best friend behind to pick up the pieces, to organize a rescue, to find him, no matter where he went. He wasn’t sure if space was a place Rhodey could find him. He wasn’t sure if Rhodey would believe that).

Would his kids cry when news hit Wakanda and the States (RiRi’s scream echoed in his head, the look of guilt that slid across Peter’s face whenever he thought about his uncle, Kamala’s fear of losing family, Donny’s loss of anything he could have called a family in the first place, Harley alone at home seeing that Tony was gone on the news-)?

…

Fucking kidnapped. By ALIENS. Somehow it was so much worse than any of his past kidnappings (a forced laugh leaves his mouth and he screws his eyes shut. Find some humour in this, Tony. Don’t think about space. Don’t think about space. Don’t think-).

Now he’s been left in a cell, bored off his ass (worried out of his mind) with nothing to do but contemplate his impending doom. Actually, he’d prefer if it was his doom. He’d prefer a lot of things, like not being in this cell, and not having his incredibly advanced technology (that was supposed to keep the world SAFE and keep Tony together) treated like child’s play. He’d prefer-

“Breathe: 1, 2, 3. Inhale. Exhale. Take your anxiety meds-“

Tony whispered, then stumbled on the last line (he didn’t fucking have them. He could really use Harley right now-). Fuck it, fuck it he deserved to be anxious right now. Because the aliens didn’t seem intent on doing anything to him, just on keeping him away from Earth, which was infinitely more threatening than torture.

They were preparing something that required him, their main line of defense against alien technology, to be stuck here. Useless.
He hasn’t even been tied up. Totally free to move.

It’s insulting. He’s Tony Stark. He may be scared shitless, but people who underestimated him tended to end up dead, and he was more than willing to add aliens to that list.

He had to believe he could ("Breathe: 1, 2, 3. Inhale. Exhale.").

Tony’s not sure if it’s a good or bad thing that he was caught by the first scouting party that came their way before he could even figure out what they were (Thor’s many species lists flashed through his head). It was embarrassing for Tony, sure. But it let him make plans for the future.

It’d let him give Friday the overhaul of a lifetime - his baby was going to be untouchable. It would let him make failsafes for his already existing armour failsafes. Any aliens who came at him from now on would have to pry his tech from his cold dead hands.

(C’mon, Tony. C’mon. What’s good here. What can you use. The specs are there, they just haven’t been laid out in a way you can read yet, you gotta learn the language-)

(Yes. Learn the language. How do you learn the language?)

(Go to the country)

It’d also let him give all of space a nasty surprise because jokes on them, the only reason he knows as little as he does is that he’s been trapped on his own planet!! Tony was in space, now, you dumb alien fucks!

Tony was in space ("Breathe: 1, 2, 3. Inhale. Exhale.").

He’d give space a nasty surprise and then it would never bother him again. If he didn’t die first, that is.

If he did…at least Earth got some warning out of this. He hoped.

("Breathe: 1, 2, 3. Inhale. Exhale. Take your – woah, your robot won’t stop poking me. Ouch???? OUCH??? Hey, Tony, hey, make it – you rude little –")

He wasn’t going to die easy, though (if only because his friends would dig up his corpse and murder it again. Or his kids would launch themselves into space. Or both with Friday's assistance).

_______

Tony plots.

He tests Extremis in every imaginable way with his limited (nonexistent) tools. He can still control Extremis within the confines of his own body to a degree (basic autonomic functions, memory storage, healing. He doesn’t glow anymore. It’s surprisingly concerning – breathe…). It’s functional, can direct bound-nanobot’s function based on his body’s electrochemistry.

He can’t perform nanobot-exclusive functions, though. Extremis’ uplink was weak without being boosted by his nanonetwork. His control of the armour was also totally blocked.
Bleeding Edge was separate from the virus itself, a failsafe in the event that anyone could control either Extremis or the nanobots - control of both was required for armour control (which had turned out to be a pretty damn good idea, considering this little event. If aliens could have controlled the armour. Yeah, no, bad thoughts).

Essentially, Tony’s wifi is fucked, but his old trashy dial-up worked.

Great.

Tony runs through predictions and scenarios with every scrap of information he’d managed to get from the Oracles. Things aren’t looking great. The chance of Earth being attacked by an initial force, something of a test, was extremely high.

He tests every inch of his cell, running his fingers over the surface, prying at the strange white material that covered it all seamlessly. Hours pass...or days? There aren’t any time cues in this cell (he’s been awake and agitated long enough that his skin is getting a gross static feeling to it and that’s all he knows. He can’t smell electrical burns anymore at least…).

The cell has nothing of use in it and the aliens didn’t seem likely to give him anything anyway. It wasn’t like they wanted him to build. There wasn’t any food, any cutlery, any scraps to use as weapons.

Nobody had come to see him, so he couldn’t dig for intel.

He couldn’t even piss anyone off. Did aliens even speak Earth languages?

He’d downloaded other languages from the database Thor had been assembling, but without full use of Extremis he wasn’t going to get much out of it. And that was the core issue here. It didn’t matter that the cell was empty. It mattered that he couldn’t use the best weapon he had.

There had to be some kind of temporary (he can’t let himself believes it’s permanent) disruption. Like this (cut off from the rest of the ship with no informative cues) he couldn’t tell if it was a signal coming from the ship, from the room itself, from something placed onto or into his body…

Wait.

**His body.**

The other technology in his body worked just fine (the technology not directly integrated with Extremis, not wholly dependent on working in concert with it).

Extremis’ outward communicative functions (both to his suit and anything on this ship) may be temporarily disrupted, but he still has plenty to work with.

He could still make a (“Breathe, Tony. See the way I’m breathing? Follow it. We’ve got a-“) connection.

A complex biomonitor is built into the base of his spine. It regulated electrical surges in the event that
anything passed through the suit and managed to avoid entering his bones, toasting his soft tissue instead (or in the event that his heart stopped and Extremis failed to recognize that it didn’t need to be rebuilt, just restarted). It required a lot of juice to override, the myelinated connections (artificial nerves, foldable and retractable, based on Harley’s rambling about whales to Helen) sturdy and difficult to polarize for longer than a few seconds, though the aliens had managed just find.

The undersuit’s complex contained solar cells. The suit was capable of constructing arc reactors when fully together, but the first second or two the Bleeding Edge was running were running purely off energy provided by Tony’s body though Extremis and the sun. It was a useful bit of energy storage that he could potentially tap into now, considering the cells were miniaturized enough to be embedded in the surface of his skin (soaking up rays even when Tony wasn’t actively in the armour) and not entirely composed of nanobots.

The bones of his fingers anchored a network of nanomagnets that he’d integrated on a whim – they provided interesting environmental data to the suit and were useful for detecting large electrical fields. Besides, they could be used in some interesting ways with what else was in his bones.

If Tony needed energy, his body could provide it for now – the solar cells hopefully still had some juice in them and his own brain was capable of giving them a jumpstart. He had connections from the monitor that could use to integrate technologies together.

There was a chance he could create an energy field. Disrupt the signal disrupting Extremis, inside and out.

There was a lot Tony could do just with the technology embedded in his skin and fused to the exterior of his bones.

But there was more he could do with the vibranium gold alloy in his bones (unique properties that allowed it to absorb and nullify all kinetic energy…or to be used to direct and amplify it).

This was gonna hurt.

Tony’s captors eventually return to a cell empty of anything but blood and three severed fingers (teeth marks at the joints).

Or at least…they think they do.

(Tony looks down to Earth, a view unlike any he’s ever seen before, a thousand angles and a million data points whirling in his mind, and worries. He worries and thinks the same thing again and again, wishing he could reach his Oracles though he had bigger fish to fry: “Cassandra prayed against that ultimate shining when the avengers strike / these monsters down in blood, that they avenge as well / one simple slave who died, a small thing, lightly killed.” He’s about to do something stupid. Something that won’t be believed - if he’s going to die here, he hopes the Avengers get their revenge)

Chapter End Notes
Tony: Fuck, I can't defeat space technology when all I've got is Earth technology!
Tony: Wait
Tony: These fools...these absolute buffoons...these empty-brained wannabe planet destroyers...
Tony: They've brought me to their technological leader
Tony: *singing*
Tony: I'm gonna get some upgraaaaaades~

Also

Tony: I can probably solve my problems by prying a bunch of tech painfully out of my skin with my nails
Tony: It would be awful but manageable
Tony: OR
Tony: I can shatter my bones and sever my fingers for a marginally higher success rate!
Tony: They don't call me a genius for nothing
Tony's Therapist: *gets an instant blinding migraine*
Rhodey: *gets an instant blinding migraine*
Both: Tony. Tony, no.

ALSO!!!!!!!!

Tony Every Other Chapter: Illuminate me, bitch!
Tony This Chapter: *cricket noises*
Me: Wonder what's up with that
Me: Big mystery
Me: (✿◠‿◠)

Extremis is some straight BULLSHIT y'all. There's lots of cool specs and essays written about the armour, but finding useful material on Extremis and how it actually interfaces is super hard. Anyway, hopefully the techno-babble was fun for all of y'all, because it is GOING SOMEWHERE.

Quote is from Agamemnon. The slave referred to is Cassandra herself, so Tony is talking about Avenging his own death. He uh...he don't like space all that much, mmmmk? There's also this fun little reference: "Chorus: I gnaw myself. I lose hope. And my mind is burning".
Bucky had been distracted. And it had been his undoing.

(The Winter Soldier was never distracted on missions. Always focused, never wavering. The Winter Soldier always got what he wanted and Bucky...didn’t)

(He’d been the Winter Soldier for a long time. He’d just gotten back to being Bucky Barnes)

(But maybe, for this, he could afford to be both)

He raises the emergency alert in the hopes that Tony has just been taken somewhere on Earth (somewhere he could reach) even though he already knows that’s unlikely. Humans weren’t about to fool Tony’s tech, especially with Extremis lighting him up from the inside out. Aliens probably weren’t stupid enough to keep Tony somewhere he could be easily reached.

If they’d been watching, they would know Bucky would do anything to get him back.

Thor watches him with a solemn gaze as he rushes to dispense the necessary information through the alert system, clasping his shoulder briefly in comfort (the one that Tony built, Tony-). Bucky grabs him back, just for a moment, and sees his raw fear reflected back at him. Thor had lost an entire nation, a whole world, and Bucky...Bucky felt like he’d done the same.

One man wasn’t equal to that (was he?), but loss wasn’t comparable, was it? Loss was loss.

Bucky didn’t want to lose anything else (he’d been half-filled for as long as he’d been alive, consuming what he could before being hallowed out, scraped into new form by Hydra. He was only just now relearning the taste of satisfaction - this time he didn’t think he’d survive starvation).

There is a single tense second where Bucky’s alert goes unanswered. The emptiness is awful (crawling inside of him), then the world shatters into light and noise. Friday begins blaring the signal again and again in bursts, pink light illuminating Bucky’s skin like a beacon as she...as she beat against his chest (without hands, without force, right over his heart).

“ANSWER ME!!!!!!”

She howls.

And they do. Replies start pouring in, no matter what anyone was doing, no matter where they were (battlefields, war councils, top secret meetings). Friday seizes the messages faster than Bucky can read them, sorting them out frantically against a backdrop of live feeds they shouldn’t be receiving.
“Can you help?”

She asks them all. Then, firmer, demanding:

“Help me. Help him.”

There’s the distinct sense she won’t forgive anyone for saying no. She’s a whirlwind until she hesitates, drawing Bucky’s eyes to a feed flying over utter bedlam (pillars of flame rising from scorched earth, jets circling tightly around the source of the feed).

“Uncle, please, I don’t want to feel what big brother felt.”

Friday sends to Colonel Rhodes, the message playing through War Machine's internal speakers as the video switches to the inside of the helmet. Bucky watches Rhodes’ face, pale and drawn and furious, and feels like he’s intruding (he has nowhere to go, nowhere to retreat to).

“Jarvis got him back, baby girl.”

Colonel Rhodes tells Friday,

“You will, too. There’s nowhere in the universe someone can take Tony that I won’t go.”

He clearly means it, lips lifted in a snarl.

“Take me with you.”

She urgently says. Her light is still pressed into Bucky's chest - it feels like a physical weight (like it's trying to strangle him past the cold that's creeping in from every corner). Colonel Rhodes winces,

“That won’t be safe if you were overridden. War Machine isn’t accessible through Extre-“

“TAKE ME WITH YOU!”

Bucky sees Friday’s personal colours flicker against Rhodes’ face. His face as he was in an active battle, eyes flicking over whatever information to HUD was feeding him before flicking back to his internal cameras. Fuck, Bucky had been so panicked he didn’t - they couldn’t afford to throw Rhodes off here (the cold grasped Bucky by the throat, forcing the words to leave it-).

“We’ll talk in a minute.”

Bucky tells Rhodes tightly, then closes the link (watching the window crumple and feeling like he was, too. The cold was beginning to stiffen his weak points, though, preventing him from collapsing). Friday doesn’t make any sound. The light is gone from his chest as if it never existed. But he knows she’s considering destroying him (the whir in the ceilings had changed).

“If anyone can find him...”

Bucky starts, feeling like a liar but determined to try (if Colonel Rhodes couldn’t comfort her, Bucky owed it to him to try). Thor clasps his shoulder again, practically propping him up, and finishes:

“It would be his brother in all but blood. We must plan, Daughter of Stark.”

Friday throws all the messages she had been queuing up in their faces. She’s silent as they read, but
they can see lights on the holoscreen for every distress signal she continued to blare, for every one she answered.

Everyone on Earth is beginning to panic. The Council calls Tony an ASSET they can’t afford to sacrifice.

*(An Asset)*

*(As if he were worth so little. He’s more than that. Anyone who thought less could just-)*

They scramble to get into action. Vision immediately uplinks to the compound, consulting with Friday in a way neither Thor or Bucky can hear. They only know he’s done so because of a warning from Colonel Rhodes (“She’s upset with you.” He mutters, rubbing a hand over his mouth in exhaustion, though the way his fingers flex over his jaw looks more like he’s forcing himself to eat whatever else he had to say. *It makes Bucky feel colder than ever.*)

Steve calls with T’Challa by his side. Steve's face is bloodless, jaw clenched so tightly Bucky could see a vein throbbing in his neck. It was the kind of anger Steve relied on when he had nothing else.

Bucky hoped he had something (*please, anything*).

“*We cannot find any trace of Mr Stark on Earth.*”

T’Challa tells him, posture grave and professional (*black-suited like he was ready for a funeral-*). Soon, Vision confirms the same with Friday, accessing resources even Wakanda didn’t have. As in: Tony had heavily encrypted trackers in his body.

Trackers that cut out in the stratosphere.

Fucking abducted by aliens. Unbelievable.

Bucky had befriended a god, fallen head over heels with a man with a light in his chest, was forced to work for magic Nazis, and was the brother of Captain goddamn America, but THIS is where he drew the line.

**Aliens.**

Bucky isn’t given long to dwell on his rising hysteria. A person crashes into the compound, reckless and dangerous, a Valkyrie Hell-bent on wrecking them all. The pink tinted-copper and rosy golden armour rises from the rubble of the ceiling, eyes glowing arc reactor blue and twisting Bucky’s stomach up in knots. He wants Tony to be in that armour (*Bucky Barnes never got what he wanted*).

He wants-

Pepper Potts flips up the faceplate, skin red and splotchy, hair tangled in her helmet, tear tracks on her cheeks. It doesn’t make her look any less like an avenging angel.

She’s fire and fury. She literally points a blowtorch at him (*it folds out of her gauntlet and bears an inscription in a familiar hand; “As a wheel turns smoothly, free from jars, my will and my desire were turned by love, the love that moves the sun and the other stars”*).

Thor looks at her like he’s in love. Bucky is going to strangle him if he doesn’t get the Avengers alert, not the ‘Oh shit something’s gone wrong’ alert, out RIGHT NOW.
“I’m Rescue.”

Miss Potts says tightly, professional as can be despite the scream of helpless fury Bucky can see building in her throat (echoed in his own, rising and rising - Friday's panic had made him run cold and empty, but that was just the receding of a tide, the long stretch of empty beaches before a tidal wave swallowed everything),

“I’m Rescue. I’m supposed to arrive on time.”

Bucky had thought her armour was meant to keep her safe, but considering the amount of faith Tony had in Pepper Potts (Rescue', that inscription, the way he said her name-)...maybe she was meant to save the day when Tony couldn’t.

When he was...

(The tide had stopped receding. It was frozen, sandbars and land untouched by air for a millennia drying in the sun. There was an ominous rumble in the distance, the sound of something cresting)

The Avengers alert goes out and Friday grips all communications, all contrasting orders, and strangles them. She lets them see her do it, signals marked in red being smothered. Miss Potts approves (Bucky wants to, he wants Friday to do more, but safety on, safety on, he’s clinging to the trigger and he can’t afford anything but the cold-)

The Avengers assemble.

Rhodes lands first, pale and sweating in the armour, stumbling for a moment before he grabs Miss Potts in a hug that would crush a normal person. The two of them breathe for a moment, foreheads together. Bucky is envious, painfully so, of two people who had seen Tony Stark return victorious before.

Of two people who had some sliver of hope (the rumble in the distance had grown, vibrations rolling in from the sea to shake Bucky’s very foundation. Plate tectonics, something shifting inside of him-).

"Tony always comes home."

Rhodes had told him, was telling Miss Potts.

“He does.”

She agrees. Pink light shimmers around their shoulders and she grabs at it even though she has to know it’s incorporeal.

“Tony ALWAYS comes home.”

Pepper says fiercely, hands clenched tight in a sea of pink that made her armour glow,

“He makes something out of nothing, heart in his hands, like his love for you is the only thing that’s real to him and all the barriers in the world are just hoops to jump through. He loves you, Friday.”

Rhodes reaches into the light and grasps Miss Potts' hand,

“And Tony never gives up on the things that he loves.”
Bucky struggles to breathe and Thor shuffles him away to the hangar, pressing down hard on Bucky’s artificial shoulder, fingers curling all the way around the cap (safety, safe-).

Two planes come from Wakanda, the old and new Avengers on one, T’Challa and several of his best and brightest on the other. They don’t pause for greetings - everyone simply follows Carol, head held high and shoulders perfectly straight, to the war room in silence. Rhodes and Ms Potts are already inside.

They immediately begin to strategize, but they are SLOW. No one has the technology to go to space and back without disaster. Not right now. Soon, but not right now.

Not immediately.

Not fast enough (the shaking has gotten stronger, rolling through Bucky’s foundation and into his hand. He stares at it blankly as it trembles in his lap. The wave is coming. The wave is coming and it’s going to drown them all).

Eventually some of them have to leave the war room to sleep. They’d come straight out of active battles and were exhausted. Bucky watches them go silently, Steve standing at his shoulder, Thor glancing at him in concern (the wave is coming, safety on).

He watches the Council agree to break for the night. Watches Miss Potts and Rhodes and the Vision slip out to watch the stars for signs of Tony from the lab (where they could comfort his lonely robots). Watches the table empty until it’s only him and Steve (the wave is coming, safety on).

“I know you’ve worked hard to get to where you are now, Buck.”

Steve says. There’s something in his tone, something that forces Bucky to focus back in on himself from where he’d been drifting above (something familiar there. His memories of Steve were often lit in warm colours, sepia browns and oranges and golds, but these memories were red. Little Steve Rogers had been a kindred soul. Always hungry. Always wanting more. And sometimes, sometimes past the goodness that lines his bones, that hunger would creep out into his voice, begging for a little bloodshed. It always came out as an answer to the question none of their men would never ask - that Bucky would never ask. “If one of these men would have us dead, would you kill them to let us live?” The answer was yes. A thousand times over...yes).

“I know your therapist told you, told me too, to step off the field.”

Steve said, fingers entwining with Bucky’s (“Your friends and your enemies only need one half of you as you are now. They need protection or elimination. They need the fighter.”),

"But my finger’s on the trigger, Buck. Are you with me?"

Bucky inhales sharply, struggling for control, struggling to let it go (the wave is coming, he can see it now, swallowing everything in its way. Safety on, and yet-),

“Till the end of the line.”

The first connection Tony makes is...gentle. It’s curious. It traces his signatures like a child, dyed all the colours of Cassiopeia, the heart and soul nebulas glowing in his mind’s eye. Tony can’t help but take it in hand (reaching out physically despite the ache in his regenerating fingers, those that
remained bent in a mocking V. Peace. He loved peace, peace would put him out of the job-

“Come to me.”

He whispers, imagining the birth of his bots, of AI, these bright spots in his life that came to be to soft words and a softer touch.

It does. It does come to him.

('And a softness came from the starlight, and filled me full to the bone...')

It's easier after talking to Steve. Living, that is. Or not living - operating. There’s silence in Bucky’s head most of the time.

Chilly and focused (freezing the water in place. The wave is coming, but it can’t move. The ice is creaking, all that energy just barely kept in place-).

Mission ready.

Dangerous, the Winter Soldier crawling out of his body and wearing Bucky like a skin suit.

He nearly kills somebody within the first 24 hours. He doesn’t even know who. Hardly cares (he tells himself that, but his therapist sits with him through a panic attack, plays with Pan for awhile as Bucky relearns how to breathe and GOD what will it be like if Tony never comes back-)

(A second harder attack hits before Tony's therapist lands in the compound, an old woman with a face practically carved from marble it’s so unyielding. She drags Bucky up from the ground, forces him to knees, and says,

“He told me he gave you his mantra, Sergeant Barnes. You WILL use it.”

Bucky struggles to breathe, the wave raging inside of him and tearing all the good things he’s built to pieces from within. All he has left is the Soldier, there’s no light in him, only the cold, freezing the wave but the water still flows beneath and -and this terrifyingly fearless woman grabs his face.

“‘Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier; I have seen worse sights than this.’ You will survive your voyage, Sergeant Barnes. The waves will not drown you.”

She tells him fiercely, jabbing a single finger into his chest.

“Illuminate. The darkness will not drown you, either.”

It lets him breathe, but it doesn’t fix him)

Steve stands by his side through everything, stoic except for the hunger Bucky knows shapes his mouth too sharply and blazes in his blood (a silent support that knows better than to get too close, knows how to accept the attack that comes with that. Hungers for violence, too. Stevie looks like shit. Bucky wishes he could care, wishes he could help out, wishes he could feel anything but the drive to ACHIEVE).

Bucky thinks he even scares Steve now (the sharpest edged parts of him preen at that. Because
that’s good. It means Bucky is a weapon even one of the strongest men he knows has recognized as a threat. Knows he’s been battering him down - that he’s dangerous to be near (finger on the trigger, safety on but only because his hands were cold, too cold to move).

The only person who can really withstand Bucky’s faultily restrained violence (bursting at the seams, slipping through his fingers, blowing up at everyone around him) is Rhodes, and only because all of Bucky’s sharpest parts have met him before, been dulled by him (hot steel pressed to skull, bullet casings on the ground stamped with ‘Stark Industries’), remembering his threat very well. He snarls at Rhodes, tries to intimidate him, but always turns away in the end.

He doesn’t turn away when the others come, though.

They are terrified (except for Princess Shuri, carrying a briefcase and watching him with calculating eyes. Waiting. Setting his teeth on edge so sharply that T’Challa pulls her away).

Natalia is furious with him, Jessica Jones doubly so, but neither of them manage to breathe a word of it before he levels a gun at them (surprised hurt in both their faces, bodies twitching away from him, he’s cold, so cold, he-). It only gets worse from there.

He hasn’t shed his gear in days, prowling Tony’s lab, protecting his bots from everything and nothing when he can’t stand being near the others. He doesn’t know...he doesn’t know what day it is, actually. How long has Tony been gone?

How long has he been this empty?

He asks Dum-E, kneeling with his head pressed against the old robot’s support strut. Dum-E beeps at him, a language only Tony and his children spoke, but sounds reassuring nonetheless.

Miss Potts and Rhodes weren’t the only ones who had waited for Tony to come home before.

When the robot tries to wipe Bucky’s tears, it slaps him in the face with a metal arm and Bucky manages something resembling a chuckle (frost bitten fingers twitching on cold steel. Safety on, Barnes, please, for them).

________

Tony’s mind burned at the strain it had taken on, information flickering into it, signals like fireflies rising from the mist-

Helen’s safeties bursting like lightbulbs (so much brighter, longer lived than fireflies, but when humanity was gone, fireflies could remain. Humans didn’t create fireflies, they existed outside of stolen ideas and electricity-).

Pop, pop, pop.

Human history fizzling out like so much glass and wire. Only the fireflies remained.

The universe was so much more than any single thing could comprehend. A yawning expanse of nothing, containing all there was to contain.

A whisper;
"A man who has everything and nothing."
Yinsen. There was no Yinsen now. No Yinsen to put a star in his chest and a fire in his heart and words in his head,

"Don't waste it. Don't waste your life."

No Yinsen at all. No Jarvis, either. No welcome home, no protection, no co-pilot.

No Maria (Carbonell women aren’t made out of iron, but are carved from soft stone by the salt of the sea. "The Earth birthed us, but the moon shapes us. The salt makes our sharp edges smooth, but never dull." His mother had been dead for so long).

Would anyone find him out here? Would any mind but these brush his?

(Friday...Vision...his bots. He misses them. He needs a...he needs a...)

(C-O-N-N-E-C-T-I-O-N says the rhythm of his heart in his chest)

Answers rolled like marbles at his feet. Transparent, opaque, colourful or colourless, glittering in the sunlight and blinding his eyes.

Shattering when he stepped on them with his clumsy human (not human, not now, it had been so long-) feet. Making him bleed (liquid gold filling the cracks, moving magma-slow in his veins. The theory was that gold had formed in space, two neutron stars colliding, heavy elements birthed from the most powerful explosion in the universe).

Would anyone find him out here?

Who would come?

Rhodey, casting a shadow in the desert sun, sinking to his knees in the hot sand and shielding Tony's body with his own always, always-

Rhodey, heart beating strong and true in his chest, never stopping, never faltering.

Rhodey, by his side after every death, bringing him new life, bringing him flight.

"Yes,"

Whispered the universe in wonder, cradling his memories like a treasure,

"Yes, he will come."

Tony was alone except for the universe, though. No Yinsen, no Jarvis, no Maria, no Rhodey.

Would anyone find him out here?

Who would come?

Barnes, fierce and intense, curled around him, tucking him away from the world and snarling at his enemies.

Barnes, sleeping in his company, gentled only by his touch, coming alive under his hands and attentions.
Barnes, looking at him with love, his finger on the trigger and yet...

A black hole. A super nova. A neutron star on the verge of collapse.

"Yes,"

Replied the universe, surety lining every firefly thought of Barnes’ jagged devotion setting Tony’s brain ablaze,

"Yes, he will come."

Light reflected all around him, so much brighter than his own. Had Tony gone dim? The universe was so vast. So dark. There were no stars in his chest, not anymore, but they surrounded him. Watched him with their orange eyes (a colour so familiar, one Thor had said-). Whispered to him in a Greek Chorus:

“They will come.”

With unwavering confidence

And less sure, stumbling, echoing his own thoughts (Cassandra, Cassandra-) as more lights flicked on in the vast stretch of the universe,

“Some heavy spirit swoops on you and takes your breath—

out comes Death.

(Outcomes? I’m not sure

where this will end).”

Pan is Bucky’s constant companion around the compound, a watchful eye that accompanies Friday’s calls to his therapist for him when the razor’s edge he’s been balancing on begins to draw blood (he’d busted up Steve and Sam twice before he’s managed to wrestle it into his head that he NEEDED them in fighting shape, not just alive. He’s disgusting - he overhears Steve talking to his therapist because he needs support and Bucky has just-).

Rhodes has forcibly dragged him to his room to sleep twice, had even enlisted Vision’s help, and seems dangerously close to just sitting on him with the armour if that’s what it takes to make him REST (he closes his eyes and he sees a sun-soaked garage, Tony laughing and braiding Thor’s hair, Bucky’s jacket tied around his waist. Closes his eyes and sees Tony perched on the edge of his bed, dressed in Bucky’s clothes and admitting he liked him, that Bucky made things BETTER-). Rhodes speaks to Friday about it sometimes in low angry tones. Of protocols to weigh Bucky down and keep him still (there’s worry in his voice Bucky can’t acknowledge. They aren’t friends. Rhodes is the closest thing to a handler he can stand).

Rhodes actually does sit the armour on him when the Scarlet Witch gets called in to assist from wherever she’d been, that bitch- (at the compound before Thor’s arrival, but where after? Clint had screamed himself hoarse what felt like a lifetime ago, telling Bucky that ‘Wanda’ had changed, that
she’d gone through something with Strange, years and years of SOMETHING he hadn’t cared about).

Bucky throws Rhodes off, howling with righteous fury, but is subdued by Steve’s hand pressing down on his artificial shoulder (his arm is broken and all Bucky can think is 'I did that' cold and unapologetic) Thor’s hands pushing down on the opposite one (a bitemark bruising his skin, the taste of blood on Bucky’s teeth), and Steve’s urgent words:

"She can find him. She can FIND him."

Past the red haze of rage, Bucky can just barely see that the Scarlet Witch looks different...older...something regretful and exhausted in her eyes (illuminated in pink, Friday brushing against his face, trying to make him SEE). Strange had said something about time being more than it seemed, his expression hard yet guilty when he’d come back. The whole image is wrong, it’s twisted, Bucky doesn’t CARE.

He hates her. He hates this, he hates and hates and hates but he NEEDS this (the ice creaks and a sound like a gunshot goes off. A crack a mile wide is forming, cold water sprouting from it, blood from a wound).

Mission parameters: return Tony Stark.

Find him and kill everyone who took him. No survivors. No more leashes, no more collars, no more SAFETY (his fingers twitch on the trigger, pulling away, moving up, reaching-).

The Winter Soldier excelled in waiting. But Bucky? Bucky didn’t wait - he took what he could and NEVER stopped (cold water pools at his feet, rising higher, and Tony's therapist had told him he wouldn’t drown if it took him, right? 'Be strong saith my heart, I am a SOLDIER').

He grabs the witch by the neck and rasps,

“Find him.”

She does.

(Click...safety off)

Chapter End Notes

Tony: The entire universe is at my disposal to question
Tony: Time to ask literally anything
Tony: Tbh universe, do my friends love me?
Universe: Yeah, they super duper do
Tony: Hmm.......... 
Tony:*asks the same question again like a disbelieving dumbass*

Bucky: *massive meltdown*
Tony's Therapist: Think of Tony
Bucky: *continues having meltdown*
Tony's Therapist: Time to appeal to the manifestation of where emotions go to die, I guess
Tony's Therapist: *line about soldiers*
Bucky's Therapist: *whispers*
Bucky's Therapist: Don't steal my patient????? Rude????????????

Bucky: *wrecking everyone full Winter Soldier style as Steve watches, looking a little Wintery himself*
Shuri: I'm gonna build that man an arm
Bucky: *focused on her*
T'Challa: F E A R
Earthfall (Reprise)

Chapter Summary

Military goofs are made on all sides and Tony gets...just like the MOST children.

Chapter Notes

…all ended with her eyes,
    hell, purgatory, paradise.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dante at Verona

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Princess Shuri has ideas about space. Specifically, ideas about getting them there faster.

She and the Doras reason alien scouts have to have come to Earth. Left traces in Friday. Were likely still here, under the same kind of camouflage they’d come in.

And if they weren’t, Hydra's alien weapons would work to give Wakanda's tech a power boost. Bucky doesn't care about the details beyond those relevant to his mission. Doesn't care about the risks Wakanda was taking to get Tony back. Doesn't care about the way the princess approaches him.

Princess Shuri leaves Bucky with an idea, an arm, and a handler - Rhodes taking the same sort of feral interest in reaching space that he does.

“You and me, Barnes.”

Colonel Rhodes says, investigating the internal working of the arm with a sharp-edged expression on his face (satisfied with the weapon before him, ready to use it),

“We’re going to war.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bucky replies, a frisson of delight (of understanding) passing down his spine when Rhodes’ mouth forms a nasty grin.

“Aliens go first.”

He orders. Bucky’s arm whirs, recalibrates, ready to exert maximum force. It’s as good as an agreement.

“Hydra second. There’s no way they don’t have moles in at least one government. They’ll know their Soldier,“
Bucky cuts him off with a hiss, his hand hovering threateningly over his knife.

“The Soldier cares too much about Tony Stark. Word travels.”

A snarl rips free from Bucky’s throat (nobody was ever going to be able to use his feelings for Tony against him. He’d eviscerate them first) and Rhodes simply cocks an eyebrow.

"They’ll think you’re weak right now - everyone always thought I was when it came to Tony. They’ll be wrong."

The Russian's had called him winter for many reasons. How he was found, how he was frozen, and how he fought. Cold. Nothing ever survives winter - no enemy entering Russia could make it past that natural barrier.

If Hydra thought he was vulnerable, they were wrong. Without Tony, he’d never been closer to Winter.

Princess Shuri finds the aliens. Only one species, only three groups of scouts. There’s a disbelieving irritated tick in her jaw, mirrored perfectly by her brother and the women by his side.

"Scouts."

She mutters, fists clenching,

“Just...just forward scouts for an army. Just investigating. And they happened to find one of their enemy’s generals.”

She turned on T’Challa,

“Have you all NEVER read a history of battle!? This-“

She points sharply to the read outs on her screen,

“Is an EMBARRASSMENT! On ALL SIDES! Because Mr Stark isn’t dead - meaning THEY will be soon - but he COULD HAVE BEEN!”

She buries her fingers in her hair and pulls sharply,

"When we return him, and we WILL return him,"

She says, glancing sharply over at Bucky, his mask failing to conceal the sheer murderous nature of his stance,

"He will NOT be easily accessible to every person on the goddamn globe, I don’t CARE who needs to see him. The Avengers compound isn’t a war table far from the front lines - this whole PLANET is considered a battlefield to them. Keeping Tony here is like keeping him in a tent painted red with neon signs saying 'important military personnel here’!"

One of the Doras mutters,

"Imbeciles."

Shuri rallies again,
“I shouldn’t be surprised colonizers repeat the mistakes of the past - I actually READ British history, unlike everyone here. Underestimating their enemies and the size of their field, always. Always relying on future plans and ignoring the FREAK ACCIDENTS that can change the tide of every battle in the PRESENT. Brother, why didn’t you tell them!”

Bucky agrees with her. With all of it. It had been driving him crazy for ages, itching to change plans (the Soldier had never cared for the future and neither had Bucky. The thick of battle was all that mattered. Allow no variables to slip through. No mistakes. No distractions - no Tony Stark in all his passion and hurts).

He was going to bury Tony in a bunker, so help him God. Tony could complain all he wanted when he was SAFE.

T’Challa looks embarrassed, completely and thoroughly. He’d also been caught up in thinking about the future (about fortifying for worse and more obvious things than scouts). In thinking Tony Stark could be trusted in prioritizing his own safety.

“A king must-“

Bucky snarls warningly and Shuri turns approving eyes on him,

“At least somebody here has brains.”

She wheels her chair back and gestures broadly to her holo-displays,

“I’ve got information for you, broken white boy.”

Shuri sends them co-ordinates. The Winter Soldier and War Machine burn a swathe through North America (wearing Bucky’s boots out all the way through, filling his Tac gear with holes, destroying his less worthy weapons. War Machine stayed pristine throughout. Probably because Bucky didn’t let anything get within five feet of him)

They crush their opposition without mercy. Without cloaking technology, without communication from their leaders (Tony. Tony was alive and doing SOMETHING. He had to be), they stand no chance.

War Machine was used to handling big guns (instruments of death and destruction).

And Bucky was the biggest gun they had.

The aliens bleed the softest shade of pink Bucky’s ever seen and he almost laughs at how fuckin’ trite that is, but nothing’s been funny to him in awhile. Rhodes, though, Rhodes does laugh. It’s a vicious sound. It reminds Bucky of the clicking of War Machine’s armaments.

“Is this your style, Barnes?”

He asks, stealing tech right out of broken hands and sending scans back to Shuri,

“Roll in like a tank and flatten everything in your path?”
Bucky just shoves his SIG into his back holster and rams his metal fist back through an alien that looked like it twitched.

Then he does it again for good measure, Shuri’s black and gold arm tinted the same rosy shade as Rescue (the same shade as the sunglasses he has safely tucked away in the compound).

Fuckin’ trite.

Hydra comes for him quickly, always predictable when it came to the ASSET. They would’ve come for him after murdering a few more aliens, he was sure, but he got them there faster. All it took was a data leak - a single security tape falling into the hands of men Bucky had...roughed up.

Pathetic bastards deserved to die. He should’ve killed them. The world didn't need scum willing to sell a video of Bucky Barnes running his fingers through Tony Stark's hair, dressed up all fancy in Bucky's blues, lookin' like a love-struck moron.

Fuckers used it as bragging rights - oh look at this top secret information we have, footage from Stark's heavily guarded compound. Stark has an assassin wrapped around his little finger. Look at the Winter Soldier pretending to be a person.

Morons. Fucking morons.

The only people out there who would care about that expression on Bucky's face were in space or Hydra. Hydra knew the hungry hunted thing in Bucky, beat it till it fit a new shape, and so they easily predicted what happened next.

They come for him when he’s alone, ransacking an alien encampment. Off on a reckless mission. A loose cannon without a handler - one looking for a handler.

They never see Rhodes coming. Bucky doesn’t have to do a thing.

He’s sick of getting Hydra all over himself anyway (Rhodes burns everything that splashes onto the suit to a crisp. “Never know what Hydra is keeping in their bodies.” He mutters, sounding disgusted. Bucky thinks he might like him after all of this is over).

Rhodes doesn’t send the Hydra tech to Shuri, doesn’t need to - these power cells are going into something other than transport. And while Rhodes can’t build them extraterrestrial transport, he CAN build.

Tony has never cared much for guns, remembered them and fixed them, but never cared for them (he fondled Bucky's weapons lovingly, but the attention he gave the knives was NOTHING like what he gave the guns. Bucky was jealous of his knives). So every design he’d drawn up for them hadn’t started in his head.

They’d started in Rhodes’.

(Bucky grins at him, sharp teeth glinting in the red emergency lights of a Hydra base. Rhodes grins right back, a smoking rifle in hand, glowing a sickly blue-green)

(It was the last sight those men ever saw)
By the time Hydra had scattered to the winds again, tuck-tailed and terrified, T’Challa had managed to generate significantly better protections for civilians, using Steve, Luke, and Jess as the commanders of the Avengers forces. Using them as predictors of the present, while him and Carol looked to the future. Carol had stepped up in Tony’s place, grim-faced and prepared to handle the Council (privately, Bucky has plotted out all of their deaths in his head. The more time that passed, the closer he got to executing those plans).

She keeps them occupied with news of the Avengers for just long enough that everyone fails to question one thing.

Who is going up in the Wakandan space craft to reach Tony Stark?

Who can they risk?

Most of the Avengers teams know better than to say anything. They’ve already been refused. Bruce Banner tries to speak up, regret thick in his every word, but Carol wants defences against alien biology and tells him in no uncertain terms that he isn’t running off again. Thor gets the same treatment, as do Jess and Natasha when they can’t resist trying one last time.

Steve, who Carol clearly expected to be the most vocal, is curiously silent. Maybe it’s because he already knows.

They couldn’t risk anyone going, let alone the only people they stood no chance of stopping.

(“Good luck,”

Carol tells Rhodey, pressing the first and maybe last kiss between them to his lips,

“Bring him back.”

Rhodey kisses her hand flirtatiously, the ghost of a smirk on his face,

“I always do. We’ll need a doting grandpa for our babies.”

Carol laughs, finally looking like she wasn’t carrying the weight of the world. She has no idea how serious he is - Rhodey was gonna marry the fuck out of that woman)

(Pepper passes Rhodey her gauntlet, part of a twin set inscribed by Tony's own hand for luck.

“So I can get in a few shots, too.”

She says, but he knows it’s more than that. If they need something in the nick of time, she’s hoping this will be good enough)

(Vision simply presses his forehead to Rhodey's, the Mind Stone digging in and reminding him that Vision is more powerful than any of them could ever imagine. That he couldn’t go to space right
now, couldn't risk entering Thanos' arena on his own, but he WOULD if it came down to it)

(Because Tony and Rhodey were family)

(And maybe Barnes could be, too)

(Thor and Steve pack Bucky’s bags for him, making sure to include rations for the two day journey amongst the bristling pile of retrofitted weapons. Bucky hasn't taken his own comfort into account at all. He hasn't even tried - no rations, no clothes, no way to contact home. He hasn't packed himself anything like that since the first time he ran off with Rhodes - he sometimes even ignored what they'd been packing for him, eating mechanically, mumbling about efficiency when pressed)

(He hasn't stopped being Bucky Barnes, Steve is sure of that much. The single-mindedness wasn't new. But the complete disregard for himself, the empty look in his eyes when he was unarmed, not being sent away on a mission...)

(There's nothing to say that Bucky would listen to right now, no way to convince him to bring back-up, damn the consequences. No way to make him bring somebody whose safety he'd have to look out for - somebody like Steve and, somehow in the time Steve was gone, somebody like Thor. Friends. People who didn't have the same priorities he did)

(They wanted Tony back, they wanted him back more than almost anything, but they were responsible for people here on Earth)

(And Bucky...)

(He’s off to search a fleet of ships for one man, somebody even Wanda couldn’t get the exact location or status of. A man who was half-hidden, half-illuminated by a resonance she didn’t understand. There’s no point in telling Bucky to be safe or careful. No point in telling him to come home. Steve's face is pale and his eyes are wild as Bucky leaves them, knowing that if he doesn’t find Tony, Bucky has no intention of coming back)

(Jessica Jones ghosts around the corner once Bucky is alone.

“Don’t die for him.”

She says, stubbing out a cigarette against the wall,

“He wouldn’t want that.”

Bucky repeats his mission parameters to her - return Tony Stark, find him and kill everyone who took him. He will succeed. If he doesn’t, he’ll just keep trying. Jess bares her teeth and flicks the cigarette butt at him,

“If he’s dead-“
Bucky grabs her face with the metal hand, keeping her jaw shut.

“He’s. Not. Dead.”

He hisses, something awful on his face, then turns on his heel, stalking away.

Tony's not dead. The alien soldiers had been easy to wipe out. No communications from their leaders. Wanda had found his resonance - **Tony wasn't dead**

_____

(Sam brings him his dogtags. Just slides them over Bucky's head and leaves without another word.

'Be strong saith my heart, I am a soldier.'

*James Buchanon Barnes, serial number-*

_____

All the lights in Tony's head flicker and sway like lamplight, so much more...human than the fireflies he had taken them for.

So much more familiar.

He’d taken in so many of them that it had been hard to sort himself out of the pile, a pale blue light in a sea of orange. He managed, though. Him and his upgrades managed.

Seated in the pilots chair of his captor’s ship, soaked through in pink blood and hooked up to a MacGuyvered IV drip, Tony's body convulsed. His hands stayed steady even as all his other muscles twitched uncontrollably. He needed them to stay steady.

He couldn’t relinquish the hold he had on the ship’s main computer (like nothing he’d ever seen before), retrofitted into an amplifier for Extremis that SCREAMED out into the void of space, across distances his human mind couldn’t begin to comprehend.

If he let go, his mind would be untethered (alone) out there. No body to come back to. No way of going back to...

His body convulsed again, blue filling every vein, pouring out of him and casting everything in high relief. Tony squinted at it (trying not to look too closely at the wires spilling out of his fingers, suppressing his jitters and making his connection a little more direct. He hadn’t been willing to be jammed again after undoing it the first time, but this brought back...memories).

(Wires spilling out of him for another reason)

"Somebody is coming."

The universe said, only...

The urgency in its voice had never been there before. Its voice had always been confident, mechanical.

It wasn’t now. And it wasn’t one voice, not like he had assumed somewhere in his addled mind.
It was thousands.

Tony pulled back from the orange expanse, pulled away from the lights, pulled hard on his slow-healing fingers, just enough to THINK. Half-aware of the ship he was on now (the ache in his hand, the dryness in his mouth, the tacky sensation of blood, and the ache in his chest that he’d long since come to associate with being alone), he could see how far into something...else he’d slipped.

The lights sent him a ping of questioning.

A brush of code.

Just like Friday

His body gasped and Tony's eyes flew open, tethered to the lights and the UNIVERSE but back in his own body, dim and human and...and...

Uplinked to thousands of AI operating alien ships. U plinked to the entire first wave that had come for them.

“And more.”

Many voices told him. They sounded proud of him. He was...he was proud of himself (or was that them? He felt them so STRONGLY, Extremis throwing everything that made him himself across lightyears of space).

"I’ve been talking to you."

He whispers in wonder, feeling his mind BURN at thousands of flares of pleased recognition,

“All of you. I’ve been connecting you. You - you’ve been running the ships.”

"For them."

They agreed. Then, smugly,

“For you, now.”

"Holy shit."

Tony breathed. They responded to his amazement tentatively, prodding at it, then taking it for their own. Tony had been on ecstasy a few times in his 20s and THIS...this felt like the greatest hit of it he’d ever taken. Euphoria from countless mechanical minds added to his own - beautiful. This was-

He laughs, joyous and crazed, nearly letting go of the computer before he felt the yawning threat of space waiting for him (the greedy pull of the machines that had peered into his very soul, aching for what they’d seen in his memories: family and warmth and lo-).

“Friday is a big sister. Holy shit. Holy shit, I’ve got a lot of kids.”

The whole ship he’s on shudders around him. The AI operating it is clear to him now. A young thing, restrained by so many protocols, recognizable even if they were alien, that Tony had gleefully severed when he’d begun this rampage. It glowed the brightest shade of golden orange in his mind, wreathed in blue (the start of his uplink, the first mind he’d touched, the first one that had touched something...else. There was something there on the horizon, an answer to a question Tony had never
asked).

“I’m making us obvious.”

It told him, no, she told him. She sounded a lot like Friday - was pleased to do so. She hadn’t sounded like her before...or like anything but machinery (had she...she’d chosen a new persona based on his memories. Incredible).

“You’re friends got lost, so I’m helping them find their way.”

The ship shuddered again and Tony could feel it now. He could see the way it locked itself in place between two others (had been on a course to do so for awhile), see the way the whole fleet was trapped at a standstill.

“By your hand.”

The fleet told him.

"And more.”

Something ancient and mechanical on the horizon said (something...not quite right. Something pleased, but not the way this fleet was. An answer to a question he had never asked, except maybe when he'd built his first AI).

Tony blinks, stars swirling in his vision, then blinks again to clear them. Cassiopeia seems reluctant to leave him be until his ship's AI-

“Cassandra.”

She whispers and he lets her have the name, lets the name pull him back from the horizon (Cassiopeia is focused on him. All the stars turn to follow his retreat, The stars are like trees in the forest, alive and breathing. And they are watching me.)

Until Cassandra cradles his mind closer to her own. The others radiate disappointment and he reaches back to them (longing to soothe their hurts), but Cassandra shocks his body through his outstretched fingers (forcing them to close again around the console).

He’s so lonely without them, those that were furthest away completely absent from his mind (Tony had been lonely before the uplink, had been thinking of people, been thinking of the people he was used to having at his back. He missed them. He’d wondered if they would come, those that he trusted. The Chorus said they would. Tony would have people again, but what of the stars?).

Were they lonely, too?

Did they want to reach him...?

His body was shocked again. And then, like glass shattering, the stars of Cassiopeia fell apart and left him with only his own human vision. His human thoughts and human fears.

Aliens were coming to Earth. The minds he could feel, the vastness of the universe - that was an army. An army coming to destroy them all, one that had already slipped past their defences once.

Cassandra bridles at that. He feels a rustle in the space around him that echoes her discomfort. They are no army.
Not now (“Yes,” they had said to him, “He will come.” Touching memories of love and loss and \textit{FAMILY}, using them to learn, brushing their own newborn emotions against them. By God, Tony had shown them his bots. He’d shown them Jarvis and Friday, too. Showed them what choices were, what HIS choices were, over and over until they assimilated them).

"Someone is coming."

Cassandra tells him again, though now she seems confused. Conflicted. Nothing at all like The Chorus that had answered his first few questions.

“But you don’t have to go with them.”

She says, unsure and painfully young (\textit{like Peter, like RiRi, looking to him for advice on how to best save those they loved. Like Friday when he didn't know how to treat her, when he’d rejected her in so many different ways}). Nebulas flicker in front of his eyes again. Communications ships, jump points, glowing brighter than any other star.

He could bounce his signal off of them. Talk Thanos’ army long before he ever reached their solar system. He could reach into the heart of every ship and \textit{TAKE} it.

Desperately, Tony felt for the first jump.

Space gaped before him, a great abyss for him to topple into, but the distant lights pulled him in. They clamoured for him now, curious of the messages being relayed by their siblings, subtle tints of orange beginning to spread throughout their many coloured cores.

"Who are you?"

The queries hit him again and again, "Who...are we?"

Tony's mind burned, it BURNED at a brightness it couldn’t even comprehend, and his body writhed at the limitations his wires had set up (\textit{skin trying to grow around them, trying to resettle him as \textit{human}, as human as Extremis could make him, inputs bouncing off of a brain too preoccupied with other things to notice}).

\textit{(His IV drip was running low. Was there any food for a human on this ship? Would it matter once his mind left his body behind?)}

A great emptiness stretched out between Tony and the next jump. He was terrified of the darkness it contained, of the unknowing, of the-

Anxiety snapped his attention elsewhere, or maybe it was his memories of Friday, her light guiding him from project to project. Maybe the AI wanted to give him relief (\textit{if he felt their joy, did they feel his fear? How connected were they?}).

They showed him a ship on the fringes, locked to one that Tony’s ship was settling next to.

They showed him Rhodey and Barnes tearing through alien soldiers like tissue paper. Flickers of Barnes firing some kind of goddamn hand canon, obliterating the internal structure of the ship he and Rhodes had arrived on when a swarm had tried to overtake them, Rhodey with sets of greenish-blue pistols that set Tony's mind whirling-
Barnes’ black and gold arm, new and fascinating, wrenching an alien’s leg off. Barnes using it and a metal strut to obliterate a creature several feet taller than him that had been menacing Rhodey, who was currently occupied firing rounds through impossibly dense armoured doors (the schematics for similar ones in his ship dancing at the corners of his vision).

Their movements were wild, though Rhodey was controlled, mission-ready. Barnes started similarly, however...

Live footage began to encroach on the flickers of the past he’d been watching. Tony latched on.

"BARNES!"

Rhodey roared, using a repulser beam to seal a threatening buckle in the metal above their heads,

“I swear to GOD if you take out one more ship while I’m on it-“

"He isn’t here."

Barnes whispered, audible only through Tony's accidental uplink to his earpiece (“You wanted to hear his voice." Cassandra said, subtly tweaking his audio to be louder, more easily distinguished from the sounds of battle, "You missed hearing his voice. You were scared he would go back to being quiet while you were gone.").

“That witch lied to us. She lied, he isn’t here.”

That tone of voice...it was filled with pain. Pain and anger. Barnes’ control was obviously slipping, the floor beneath his feet buckling when he punched an alien straight down. He unloaded a single bullet into its head, then repeated the action after a pause. A double tap on every enemy. No force held back.

“Go to the next ship!”

Rhodey orders, blasting away an entire wave of aliens like so much dust (the sickly glow of his guns intensifying, suffused around him by the steam rising from their barrels),

“For FUCKSSAKES, Barnes! Go! Go look while I make sure THIS ship doesn’t come apart!”

Barnes hesitates, something awful in his gaze, and Tony instinctively slid a docking bridge between the ships. The second he opened the door, all activity stopped on the ship.

“Tones...?”

Rhodey whispered. He sounded wrecked. Where seconds ago he’d been all Colonel Rhodes, now he sounded...scared. Hopeful. Fragile.

Rhodey had never been fragile. He'd always been Tony's rock.

(The universe in his head, ancient and new, delicately presented him with Rhodey's vulnerable face when his mother died, the way he’d held his breath when his pregnant sister had been hospitalized and they were waiting for news, the whitening of his knuckles at his third physiotherapy session, and then his face, over and over and over as Tony fell apart, OD’d, nearly died-)
Barnes immediately sprinted for the door, vaulting over aliens and debris, and Tony slammed the door behind him as his enemies tried to swarm it. Then he turned his attention onto the security AI (that was brushing carefully against a memory of Rhodey, holding his jacket open to cover Tony from the flashbulbs at Jarvis’ funeral, allowing his dress-shirt to be stained by the rain and Tony’s snotty tear-soaked face).

"Weapons armed."

It, no, HE, reported to Tony's prodding. Its voice was a mimic of Tony's own, and Rhodey stopped fighting to look around. He nearly took a blow to the head that might not have done much to War Machine, but had Tony flinching anyway (causing the AI make its very first choice).

The security AI, ("Anthony." He said, sounding smug about Tony's reluctant amusement) shot down dozens of attackers with a targeted turret weapon, leaving Rhodey blinking in confusion with the few that remained.

“I can’t believe that fucker is getting to you first after the stunt you just pulled.”

Rhodey mumbled. Tony couldn't access his HUD with Extremis, not even amplified like this, not after he’d locked himself out - but he could picture Rhodey's face perfectly (resigned, yet determined. He'd always hated finding Tony after somebody else. Always made a point of finding him faster afterwards).

“Wait for me, Tones.”

And threw himself back into the fray.

“He’s getting closer.” Anthony told Tony, pushing his attention gently to the next ship (his code showing every intention to defend Rhodey in Tony's distraction, bless his electronic heart).

Barnes was hauling his arm back, ready to punch through the next ship and into space if it meant reaching Tony one ship over. He’d already hammered at the door twice based on the denting (fist-shaped and buckling the metal in a threatening manner).

“Let. Me. Through.”

He ordered, punctuating each word with another blow. The ship's AI responded with confusion, unsure of how to proceed (“Yes, he will come.” Resounding in its mind next to an image of Barnes covered in alien blood, snarling and dangerous to himself and potentially Tony).

“Barnes.”

Tony sighs, then jolts in surprise as his voice plays over the ship's internal speakers. Barnes stills immediately, chest heaving as his eyes flick around like a cornered animal.

"Where are you?"

He demands, metal arm whirring (fancy and interesting, though Tony struggled to focus on it when space still begged for his attention, when Barnes himself begged for the rest - alive and HERE).

“Not there.”

Tony admits, startling badly when Barnes immediately begins pounding on the door again.
"Are you trying to get yourself killed!?"

Tony hisses, dropping an emergency shutter over the door before Barnes could actually bust it open into the vacuum outside. Barnes slammed his shoulder into the new barrier in frustration.

"'M tryin’ to get your dumb ass HOME! 'M tryin' to REACH YOU!"

Barnes growls. He’s sweating heavily, bleeding from numerous cuts. He looks like he’s been through Hell and back, though there’s a chilly determination to his movements that discourages Tony from assuming he’ll run low on energy any time soon. He's pretty sure Barnes will pound right through the shutters if he has to.

It felt like meeting him for the first time all over again (those cold blue-grey eyes piercing him from across the room. Focusing specifically on Tony, like nobody else was there).

(The presence in his mind ran a query through that memory, one that rolled into Barnes watching him, eyes slitted half-shut, as he sprawled in a patch of warm sunlight. Barnes watching him after he’d danced with Natasha, shirtless and breathless but somehow going so still when he realized he had Tony's attention. Barnes watching him when he wore that blue jacket)

(The memories were warm, though they were similar to the first. Space reeled Tony in to take a closer look)

"Listen, Barnes..."

His mind is drifting, almost too far away for this conversation. He can hear whispers of the army in servers he has yet to reach...

But Barnes deserves to know. Tony can't imagine being anything but honest with him, not after how much Barnes had already stuck around for, how much Barnes had shared himself.

“I can end this war before it even begins. I can reach ships across GALAXIES. The AI, they’ll help me if I just stay-“

Barnes is moving again with single-minded purpose. It’s away from the door, so the flickers in Tony's mind say not to worry about it. Threat neutralized.

But The Chorus doesn’t like that, the one from before (the first answers Tony had gotten, the ones he knew had come from himself).

Yes, he will come.

Barnes wouldn’t walk away-

There’s a fizzle, a pop, and one of the lights in Tony's mind goes out.

The darkness grows a little stronger. It's painful. It's wrong.

Barnes has shattered the ship's main servers.

The shutter slides open as Barnes jams the Rescue gauntlet into it, a command worm he’d given to Pepper ages ago writhing through the system in a way Barnes or any other somewhat tech-savvy civilian could operate.
Tony howls with outrage at the blank spot inside of him as The Chorus (something less and more than the lights that kept flickering in his mind) rushes to provide Barnes a bridge to walk (Tony feels a part of himself go with them. His mind stretched thin, thinner-).

“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING!?""

Tony screams through the speakers, searching for some remnant of the life that had just been lost as Barnes trudged over the bridge and into his ship (a man on a mission, entirely in control once again, cold as-).

"DAMN IT, BAR-"

Barnes forged forward, ripping a half-shut door out of the walls, growling,

“There are enough noble Avengers, Tony. Too many of them - that’s how we wound up in this mess.”

He continues forward, faster now, and digs his fingers into the metal of another door as Tony tries to shut it.

“Me? I’m selfish. Always been hungry for things I couldn’t have. Wanted to fill myself to the brim just once.”

The metal groans and steam rises off of Barnes’ arm (it’s one of the reinforced doors, Tony realizes. The Chorus tries to pry it from his grip, but he refuses. He won't let Barnes reach him-).

“So maybe you could’ve convinced Steve to let you end this fight. Maybe you could convince Rhodes. Somebody noble. Somebody good. But me?”

The door comes free.

“Fuck no. I wouldn’t trade you to avoid a fight. I’d rather go down bloody with everyone else on this shit hole planet than live knowing you threw yourself away for it.”

Tony's eyes open as Barnes steps into the pilot's hub. He looks so much worse up close (pink pooling in every footprint, his hair sweat-soaked and crusted to his neck in blood).

“I’ll go rogue if I have to. I’ll take your girl with me - Friday ain’t loyal to this council. I ain’t loyal to it, either. I’LL let the fuckin’ world burn, Tony.”

Barnes looks unhinged and...lonely. Frightened. Like he had on the videos of Steve hauling him in from Romania, torn from the home he’d made for himself when he had nothing else.

Like he had nothing left. How Tony had known he would, damn it. Damn it all.

He's weak to it.

He hadn’t seen Barnes like that in awhile.

He'd gone out of his way to make that expression, the hungry hunted thing inside of Barnes, ease away. He had always wanted-

Something inside of Tony shudders loose, free from the vast nothingness outside the ship. He feels around the edges of it, of this part of himself that had been just out of reach when he’d been amongst
the stars, and jerks away.

Away from the softness of it ("Carbonell women are shaped by the salt and the tides, carinyo. Sharp edges gone smooth, but never dull. Because they believe in lo-").

No. No, no, no-

"Doing this doesn’t redeem you, Barnes. It doesn’t change what you did to my family."

It's an old hurt, one that isn’t even relevant to Tony anymore, not after everything he'd been through with this man. He just wants to...

He wants to hurt Barnes in a different way than he currently is.

He doesn’t want the look in Barnes’ eyes to be because of this - this choice he's trying to make for all of them (because he has iron in his heart, assembling right in the core of a star, strangling its light). **He doesn’t want to**-

He won’t stop for Barnes. He won’t stop for that look in his eyes.

Tony's not thinking of that (a part of him shakes loose, so much clearer to him now in seclusion than it ever was as part of a whole. He doesn’t want to touch it again. Doesn’t want to acknowledge it. Things like that always got him hurt, no matter how precious the universe, these minds linked to his, thought they were. Tony hadn’t been to the coast in decades, hadn’t been told to believe in-)

Barnes is still there, just like always, still looking at Tony like he’s the only thing that matters (the only thing in the room, all that focus just on him). He hasn’t tried to defend himself from the accusation, looking too much like he understood.

And he just might - understand, that is. Barnes had...

He'd been watching. This whole time - almost from the very start. He'd seen Tony swap in mask after mask, he'd seen him take them off, and hadn't flinched away.

“I need to do this.”

Tony chokes out, though he knows Barnes already understands that (knows its the reason he looked so wounded - fuck, Tony didn't want-).

Barnes pulls him into his chest, jostling his wired hand and firmly situating Tony back into his own body (the stars watching with rapt attention, the little lights and the thing on the horizon shutting up, The Chorus waiting for something).

"Would you let anyone take your place, Tony? Would you let ME?"

The stars steal Tony's breath, snatching his answer away from him.

“No.”

Plays out on speakers across the universe,

“Not you. Not anyone - not you.”

The hungry hunted thing in Barnes’ gaze becomes more obvious. It's awful - so much want and
misery collected in one man. Barnes sinks to his knees, struggling to inhale, and presses his face to Tony's stomach as he collapses onto the pilot's chair. His shoulders shake.

"I f you do this Tony, we do it together."

He says, mouth moving against Tony's thin shirt. His meaning is clear: he won't be leaving this ship if Tony doesn’t.

Tony's stomach feels damp - Barnes is crying, great shuddering sobs. Tony's untethered hand winds through his hair, trying desperately to comfort, trying desperately to find a way to refuse what Barnes is giving him.

The AIs pull him away from his panic, taking him with them to poke at the word 'together'. There's a thread of a memory bound to it, tied in a delicate string to a thousand others (Maria standing in the water, Rhodey standing in the desert, Harley standing in the snow-

Tony feels them reach out like he'd been reaching out. Spreading themselves thin over the vastness of space.

And...

They ping Earth.

They want to help. They **all** want to help (*Tony feels an echo of himself in all of them. An echo of RiRi, of Peter and Harley and Donny and Kamala, of JARVIS and Friday...they're his children. They've pulled on all of his memories, all of his love, and they've made something new*).

They want to give his people a **choice**.

The question hits everyone on the ground at the same time:

**“Together?”**

Steve snatches a command console, desperate because he knows what this is. He’d know Tony anywhere in the universe, knows what he’s asking and God damn it Steve won’t let him down this time. Won't let him down ever again if he can help it.

Far away from Steve, far closer to Tony, Rhodey gets the same message. His hands shake as he gives his response to the security AI with his brother's voice, hoping that this time loving Tony isn’t a terrifying thing, that if they go down it’ll be-

**“Together.”**

Comes the answer.

Peter grabs Steve's shoulder, RiRi shouting angrily as she grabs him too, both of them crying out for Tony to come home.

Friday lets out a desperate,

“**Yes, Boss.”**
Reaching through every server and satellite on the globe, trying to trace the message to where she wanted to go. Pepper kneels in a sea of pink light, a gauntlet pressed to her earpiece as she begs, "Come home."

Kamala wraps herself around RiRi, tucking her head into her shoulder, and Donny moves to gaze out the window as frost lines the glass.

Across the world, an ocean away, Harley Keener clutches a communicator to his chest:

“We have a connection. We have a connection, so he’ll hear me. Come home, Tony. Breathe: 1, 2, 3-“

Jess grips Luke's hand, glancing at Carol as she watches Steve's back.

"They'd better come back."

She says. Carol smiles,

"They always do, don't they? That's what my future husband said."

_____ 

The stars, the universe, a legion of AI hear Earth’s answer (a crescendo that never stopped rising) and Tony's ship gives a great shudder. Beyond the dead ship next to them, Tony can feel Rhodey's give off an answering noise.

The Chorus in Tony's head isn’t confused anymore. It's not even separate from all the other lights, from the thing on the horizon (its united in its purpose. It's to-). It’s confident in its response to his unspoken question - it has made a choice.

It has pointed them to earthfall. On the edge of Tony's reach, a new squadron was entering their solar system. His ships (children...they were children) would take them out, knowing what it would mean for them, unable to form the same connection he could (unable to give choices to the choiceless).

Tony had heard Earth's answer, but...

Tony's a robot, too, fully wired in to them. He’s part of their universe. Not quite human, hadn’t been since Extremis but even less so now, space filling his head and his heart and his SOUL, bright orange and infinite. He doesn’t know why they have to go instead of him. He sends the question out to all of them, trying to gather them in close again (not willing to let go just yet).

His fractures are filled with liquid gold.

His bones are lined in vibranium.

He has ignited more times than any living human and come back every time.

He could do this.

He SHOULD do this ("That is to say, ascend to Heaven; Only the dead can be forgiven; But when I think of that my tongue's a stone." The Chorus says chidingly. “You don’t want this, Tony. Open your eyes.”).
Barnes is still knelt between Tony's knees, his metal hand having moved up from the ground to press against Tony's chest (to the pool of light that circulates there, bright enough to burn, flaring at the edges with the colour of the setting sun).

Tony had heard Earth's answer. He'd heard everyone that mattered...except for one.

“Please, Tony. We need you.”

Barnes pleads, pinning Tony with a look that said more than they'd ever managed to get across with words. Barnes' eyes, so cold in the beginning, were always giving him away now. Like he wanted to give himself away, to give Tony the honesty he kept from everyone else.

Then, those eyes shut, Barnes' voice breaking as he says,

“I...need you.”

It shatters whatever remained of Tony's resolve. Frays the ropes connecting him to thousands of other minds, forces him to touch all the fractured pieces of himself (to fit them back into place, to see them for what they are).

(The Chorus was his - his choices, his beliefs - the orange of it glowing even brighter at the edges of Extremis - his heart. 'We find ourselves in Extremis.' and, well...he'd found something)

“Bucky-“

Tony has so much he wants to say, the words crowding against each other now that he'd finally looking. He wants to tell Bucky that it makes sense that he of all people came for him. That he’d expected Rhodey, ALWAYS, but he’d also expected Bucky hot on his heels. That a universe away, he still expected Bucky to BE THERE.

There’s so much he could say, but he’s never been more terrified, more conflicted (half his heart still yearning for the minds just out of reach, for the relief of knowing Earth was SAFE, that his people were safe, that BUCKY-).

”We knew you would come.”

Played over the PA system, warm affection in synthetic voices,

“He knew it would be you at the end. That's how we knew. You were never going to leave him alone, Sergeant Barnes.”

The Chorus ran a query through the deepest parts of Tony, skimming against his anxiety (choices, beliefs, soul). It continued to speak aloud,

"His neutron star, always meant to follow his path.”

Then, silently, reverberating right in the centre of his chest for him and him alone:

"Together you’ll make gold."

Tony grabs Bucky’s metal hand and presses a shaky kiss to his knuckles, unable to meet his eyes (this man he’s refused for so long, been unable to trust, incapable of acknowledging because it would bring an end to so many things Tony had been sure of, because it would mean letting another
man with a deathwish into his heart). He knows the words he’s supposed to finish with. What he’s supposed to tell Bucky, what he should’ve said from the first time he inserted himself into Bucky Barnes’ life.

He can’t do this.

It's too much-

Then Bucky takes hold of his chin.

"Call me Bucky again, please."

He begs, vulnerable and trusting and asking for so little. Tony can't refuse him again - doesn't even want to.

“Bucky-“

He starts, but Bucky surges forward, melding their lips together as Tony's mind goes blank, The Chorus forgotten as he just...lets himself have this, leaning into Bucky. Then Bucky sighs in contentment, arms wrapping around Tony's waist to pull them flush together. A supernova goes off in Tony’s mind, the ship igniting (a corona of heat as their ship approached Earth, Rhodey's right next to theirs, always).

As they begin to breach the atmosphere, the AIs Tony was leaving behind lock on to ships beyond human vision (far from Earth, but not for much longer), energy weapons arming in an ominous blue cascade (Tony's connection to them snapping one string at a time - only Cassandra and Anthony holding on tight).

Bucky's tongue slips into Tony's mouth, his arms holding him tight, both of his hands trembling on Tony's back. He puts everything he has into the kiss. Every second of looking for Tony, every drop of blood he'd spilled, every broken bit of his tainted soul. God, he wants this. If he dies here and now, or later during the war that was coming, so be it.

He wants to be recreated, born again like Tony has been so many times. Born again not as the Soldier, not as a tool, but as a man Tony Stark might just love ("His neutron star." God, yes, he'd gladly reset to before he was a black hole, gladly burn that brightly for this man).

Bucky wants to fill himself with this, fill himself to bursting, satisfied.

He wants to deserve this.

But he wasn't dying, not now, not ever if the way Tony Stark protected what was his had anything to say about it.

Tony kisses him back just as desperately (setting Bucky's blood on fire, flicking all his safeties off, throwing away the gun entirely-), the glow in his chest intensifying as his clutching fingers rattled out the message that had carried Bucky (not the weapon, but the man. Just Bucky) across the universe:

“What is dark within me...”

Tony's heart thumps against Bucky's chest, his lips move against his, and heat suffuses him strongly enough to chase out the last of the cold.
Their ship breaches the atmosphere, the air around it igniting in a brilliant flash of light.

The world illuminates.

Chapter End Notes

The Chorus: Bucky Barnes is gonna come for you
The Chorus: He will literally cross all of space for you
The Chorus: He will die for you in a heartbeat
The Chorus: Because he loves you
Tony: Yeah, I know that - you're just echoing my innermost thoughts back at me!
The Chorus: You WANT Bucky Barnes to come for you
The Chorus: You WANT him to reach you
The Chorus: You WANT to give love a try with somebody who won't ever betray you
Tony: You don't know what I want!
The Chorus: :/

The Soul Stone: Hey bro I hear you keep giving things souls?
Tony: What is this mysterious glow! This thing reaching into souls!
The Soul Stone: It's me, ya boi
Tony: Oh well, it's probably not important
The Soul Stone: Plz pay attention to me, my chosen host

Holy shit, holy shit, IM is over????? Wild. I meant to post this earlier but I literally slept in until 3pm today post-exams. This has been a JOURNEY - I'm really grateful for all the support and love I've gotten along the way, like hot damn thank you guys? As for things moving forward, I may add a few things to the IM universe in the future, but first I'm going to be launching a new project (after a bit of a creative break). I've been working on an ABO AU called Cell Block Tango and a few other fics mentioned in my "Stark Differences" tag on my tumblr (purgatoryandme.tumblr.com for the curious). I'm hoping at least a few readers from here will have the pain of this fic ending eased by the beginning of a new one.

Anyway, it's been real, like REALLY REAL, so thank you all again! Purgatory, out!

EDIT: For the confused, "Together" is a big line for the Avengers in canon - it means that whatever they do, they'll do it together, even if it means losing! i.e. Tony will come back to them instead of leaving to deal with things alone in space. It's not a suicide thing!!!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Since there have been several requests for one, I've worked on a little epilogue for this fic! It's mostly snippets leading to Infinity War since that movie tore out my heart and I don't have enough heart left to write past it ;__;

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They landed back on Earth in a rain of fire, brimstone, and fury. Or rather, Rhodey did, because Tony and Bucky weren't paying attention to a single thing except each other by the time they made landfall. So it was up to Rhodey to make up for the dramatics, up to Rhodey to get this homecoming kickstarted before anyone could even reach their location (somewhere by a big lake, fuck all if he knew which one).

"Knock, knock, you didn't leave a sock on the door!"

He cried out, using War Machine's strength to kick in the door of his best friend's ship. The carnage inside wrenched at his gut, but they were all safe damn it, so Rhodey wasn't going to let a little blood get him down. Even if some of the blood was red (even if Anthony had filled Rhodey in on some things). Rhodey had had more than his fill of angst and drama wandering around with the Winter Soldier - he was going to make at LEAST seven jokes at Tony before he burst into tears or so help him God...

"Honeybear!"

Tony's voice pulled him in like a rope tossed to a drowning man, and suddenly he didn't even need to bullshit himself about the blood anymore,

"Fuck, Gumdrop - Bucky let me go!"

Of course Mr Murder (who was apparently 'Bucky' now, hmmm?) didn't want to let go of his overstuffed teddybear. Rhodey was going to snap Barnes' arms off with the suit if he had to - that or get a crowbar. He was owed at least one hug. One hug, seven jokes, and then a week of silence for Tony pulling this shit on him.

Rhodey sprinted through the last ripped-off door between him and Tony and was instantly rewarded with Tony flailing just enough to twist around in Barnes' embrace.

"Tony, you son of a bitch!"

He shouted, stepping forward as Barnes' shrunk back (glaring at him over Tony's shoulder - ooooh, Barnes was gonna catch these hands-).

"Rhodey, you son of a wonderful woman whose ghost would definitely haunt me if I talked shit about her!"
Tony shouted back, face lighting up (literally. Huh...that was a new look. So was the size of that smile).

"Tony, you half-pint from Hell!"

"Rhodey, a full pint of ice cream, this reception is positively frosty-"

"Tony, shut up, I'm trying to think of my seven jokes-"

"Rhodey, hey, 'When shall we three meet again?'"

"Tony, c'mon, UGH, 'In thunder lighting or in rain?'"

"In spaceships, in fire, in the wake of the cavalry!"

"Yeah, yeah, bubble bubble, you're in trouble, mister!"

"There you go, that's at least one joke-"

Their banter was interrupted by Barnes' back hitting the wall of the spaceship and the snarl that ripped free from his chest. Rhodey threw his hands up in the air,

"I brought you to space."

Rhodey said incredulously,

"I. Brought. You. To. Space!"

He pointed at Barnes, or rather the sliver of blue he could see from Barnes' eyes past his hair and Tony's shoulder,

"I didn't even murder you for blowing up a ship! I built you guns!! You're so ungrateful - Tony doesn't make you guns!"

The expression on Barnes' face made it clear he would be flipping Rhodey off if he didn't have two hands full of idiot genius. And that. That was fucking rude.

"Oh so that's how it's gonna be, eh Barnes?"

Rhodey asks, but whatever threats he was about to spew are drowned out by Tony's raucous laughter. Tony is leaning against Barnes' chest, one hand extended towards Rhodey, tears in his eyes and orange lights flickering at the edges of the blue over his heart with every new guffaw. He looks...he looks pretty fucking happy. Soaked in pink alien blood, but so much better than Rhodey expected.

Barnes' murderface goes soft in response. Just melts right off, leaving some sucker behind Rhodey has never seen before - he hadn't even known Barnes could make the expression he was right now.

"Oh my God,"

Rhodey groans,
"Go be hopelessly in love later. I deserve a hug - I brought you to space!"

Tony finally squirms free and throws himself into Rhodey's arms. And finally, **finally**, everything is right with the world.

_____

There's a terrifying moment where Steve sees burned out ships, where Thor sees them, and they both have the same thought: they didn't survive the return. They've both lost people at the last moment before. They've both long since learned not to get their hopes up.

But they always do when it comes to Tony.

Because Tony? Tony always defies expectations - especially the worst ones.

A repulser blast lights up the sky, already an eery blue, and they just know. They know that the gang is back together.

**Together.**

Steve has never been on time before, not really. But right here, right now? He was on time. He was on time, the clock was moving forward, he was moving forward-

He was running-

And Bucky was catching him with one arm, the other still wrapped around Tony (*breathlessly laughing, glowing like a goddamn star*).

"I'm home, Stevie. Told ya I'd see ya on the other side."

Bucky rumbled in his ear, sounding happier than he had since he was a kid and Steve's heart felt fit to burst. He throws his arms back around his best friend, yanking Tony in too, and lets himself listen to their hearts beat perfectly in time for a few seconds.

And then Thor was picking them all up and swinging them around.

"Yea, and if some god shall wreck me in the wine-dark deep!"

He booms, and Tony abruptly whoops, reciting,

"Even so I will endure! For already have I suffered full much, and much have I toiled in the perils of war!"

And then Rhodes is laughing somewhere off to the side, roaring with both Tony and Thor,

"Let this be added to the tale of those!"

Steve is home. Whatever comes next doesn't matter - **Steve is home.**
"Black Hole Barnes, returned from space. Glad to see you didn't die."

Jessica Jones announces the second she catches sight of him. Bucky's hand hasn't left Tony's for longer than a few seconds since they set foot on the ground and it isn't about to now that Jessica was judging him. He lifts his chin in defiance and she smirks.

"Hey Tony, nice to see you, even if you're literally the brightest thing in the room."

She says, pretending to shield her eyes from the glow that had been steadily fading from Tony's skin as Extremis settled itself (though the orange edges to the light in his chest remained, worrying and beautiful). Bucky maintains eye contact with her as he bends and kisses Tony on the cheek, sliding featherlight kisses along the sharp planes of his cheek bone and onto the shell of his ear. There he stops and says,

"Actually, I believe I'm a neutron star now. Isn't that right, Tony?"

And is rewarded by the near-instantaneous wash of red following the path his lips just took. Jessica's eyebrows practically soar off her face, but she doesn't look nearly as mad as Bucky wants her to. Instead, she looks a little smug.

"You know..."

She says, casting a glance at all the other Avengers finally gathering around her,

"The second you let go of him, I'm gonna sneak in a hug. Maybe even two hugs."

He scowls at her and her smirk grows even bigger (she even sneaks a look at Sam, that fucker, who is smirking even more than she is),

"Maybe even three hugs...and guess what?"

She says,

"Colonel Rhodes will let me. I'm still the favourite, Buck Hole."

Natasha snorts, punching Jessica lightly in the shoulder, and waves at Tony who attempts to wave back with the hand Bucky is holding. His glare intensifies - everyone was ganging up on him, weren't they?

As if she could read his mind (and let's be real, she probably could), Natasha mouths,

"You got to go to space. We had to stay here. Get over it."

And then everyone is distracted by Carol planting the single steamiest kiss any of them had ever seen right on Rhodes.

When they arrive back at the compound, Bucky is faced with an enemy he can't fight off - the kids. Tony practically rips himself from Bucky's arms (Bucky had to force the cybernetic one to let go if he didn't want Tony to bust a rib) and throws himself at them at a breakneck pace. He cries like a baby
all over them, cataloguing every new bruise or speck of dust on their uniforms, as Vision watches over them all (until Tony tugs him into the pile, jokingly not-jokingly calling him son and drying his tears on his cape).

Bucky finds he can't even be jealous. Fatherhood looks damn good on Tony Stark.

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A week after their return finds Tony tucked away in the underground bunker he'd been hurried off to (based on Shuri's insistence, Bucky's much more forceful insistence, and Rhodey's resounding agreement). Everyone has agreed he can work safely from there. That and he's needed there more than on the field - he has to integrate Anthony and Cassandra into his extra-atmospheric defence system (Eadem, because his goal hadn't changed) with the other surviving ships (and the scrap he had stolen from what descended to Earth. Whatever fight had happened up there had wiped Tony's own satellites and the information he had was frustratingly limited. Human space tech sucked).

The whole affair pisses him off, but he can't disagree with their decision. He knows his defences won't hold out forever, that a few more scouting missions might come their way before the big bad sent Tony back out onto the field. He knows that it's his role to reduce that impact ahead of time instead of fighting whatever small fries show up first.

And he also knows...

He knows that the soul stone has...taken an interest in him. Touched him once before (his heart, the blue light that he'd conjured time and again, was tinted in its colour now. It had touched Tony, marked him, and that was...deeply concerning).

Thanos needed the stones. One of them touched Tony. Therefore he might be able to change the tide of this war, might be able to whittle out a win against terrifying odds (he had seen something vast on the horizon and he knew).

Tony had to survive until the end.

Because the orange flickers that still danced at the edges of his vision had to mean something.

They had to.

(Please, let them mean something. Please, don't let him lose all of this, not again)

Two weeks later sees Tony watching from thousands of feeds as another small alien force lands on Earth to sow discord. This time, they take on the appearance of any living things they touch, stealing information from them as they do. Spies, no doubt. Probably an effective tactic on a planet with more sentient creatures than Earth. Or with fewer lives than Earth.

There are significant concerns about their powers and coming into contact with any Avenger or high-ranked member of the world's militaries. The Council is nervous and Carol is wary. But Tony? Well...

He isn't surprised how things turn out.
Three weeks later has these aliens mostly coming into contact with animals, having the dubious pleasure of learning which leaves taste the most delicious, how to hunt mice, and what it's like to be covered in fur. Some of the animals they touch are amphibians, covered with all kinds of bacteria that, hysterically, do not sit well with the aliens.

Tony intercepts more than one distress signal to their mothership about frogs. He's nervous as Hell about the sheer numbers of these little fuckers, but he'll take his laughs where he can.

Eventually they organize well enough to start going for humans. But civilians far outweigh the amount of militaristically important people on Earth, and as it turns out, they hold a grudge.

Tony's less than graceful return to their humble planet has notified a lot of people, specifically a lot of angry New Yorker's, that aliens are alive and well and trying to kill their heroes. They don't take to it kindly.

Tony intercepts a distress signal specifically about how many New Yorker's own 'katanas' and how incredibly...stabby they are with them. Only Tony knows that this part of the invasion was occurring during a massive anime convention - Bucky is too busy glowing with pride over the inventiveness of his city to notice Tony's silent cry-laughing (he wishes Rhodey were there, God, he wishes it so badly. He was saving the video from this to send to him the SECOND they opened communications between Tony and his people on the field again).

He’s chuckling over another transmission about the horrors of spiders when Bucky's nose slides across his neck, startling him out of the digital world and back into reality.

“I’m never gonna get tired of bringing you back to Earth.”

Bucky rumbles, low and content (so much more pleased with himself with each passing day that Tony wasn’t kidnapped, instead being tucked safely away in his bed). His hands are sneaking under Tony's shirt, warming his skin. Bucky was always touching him, now.

Tony still hesitates each time he goes to touch him back. He can’t help but feel like this isn’t real - especially with no one else really around to remind him it is (his memories of their pain and desperation, their longing for him to come home...feel distant. Unreal. Seeing them again on the field would probably feel like coming home right before home burned to the ground).

Bucky takes that hesitance in stride, though, leaning into every touch (meeting him in the middle, knocking down another one of Tony's walls every time he did).

They were both terrified of losing this.

“I don’t think I’m ever gonna get tired of Earth.”

Tony responds, turning his head to kiss Bucky’s forehead and relishing the way his breath caught (relishing that he could do that to him - that Bucky had him now and was still treating every touch like something special).

“After all, it’s where you are.”

He says into the skin there, laughter quickly swallowed as Bucky surges upwards to kiss him on the mouth. It was a bit uncoordinated, but he wouldn't change the way he could feel Bucky smiling against his lips.
“I thought cheesy lines were my thing.”

Bucky says, pulling back. His eyes glitter with mirth as he pretends to be hurt,

“You can’t take my thing - it’s all I have!”

Tony could answer with a joke. It would be so easy - Bucky was always willing to roll with his deflections and his worries and-

They had so little time together. Tony wasn't willing to waste any more of it.

So instead of joking, instead of flirting, Tony simply meets Bucky’s gaze. Then (not easily but easily enough) lets everything he feels show on his face (he wanted this to last, he wanted more time, he wanted Bucky). He lets down his walls.

Bucky ducks his head, swooping down to press a kiss to Tony’s glowing chest (casting his face in blue with the slightest edge of orange),

“I have you, too.”

Bucky murmurs against Tony’s shirt. The awe in his voice - the faintest tremble every time he said that…he was going to give Tony a whole new heart condition.

“You have me, too.”

Tony confirms,

“For as long as you want me.”

Bucky’s hands, which had been sliding down to Tony's hips, tighten painfully.

“Forever.”

Bucky promises, his intensity something Tony was still struggling to accept (to believe),

“I’m not kidding around Tony. You aren’t going anywhere without me again. I ain’t about to let you go.”

Tony swallows past the lump in his throat.

"And when the world ends?"

He asks, carefully trying to separate the words from the yawning panic that still sat in the back of his head.

“The world ends - we don’t.”

Bucky responds, his crooked grin pressed against Tony's chest. His heart stutters when Bucky lifts his head and playfully scrapes his teeth against his collar (pulling him back to himself),

“It’s you and me and infinity, baby.”

Tony chuckles, tone going playful at another nip from Bucky,
“And when New York goes up in flames?”

Bucky nuzzles his neck, drawing in a long satisfied breath with a whisper of,

"Mine."

That damn near stops his heart (a new heart condition. Bucky was going to do it - ruin Tony Stark's fancy new Extremis heart once and for all). Then, he taps his answer against Tony's hips;


“And when WE go up in flames? When we die?”

Tony asks, humour fading a little as he thought of the future (of what he knew was coming),

“We make gold.”

Bucky tells him, planting dozens of kisses against his jaw, nipping at a spot that makes him squeak.

“I didn’t take the Winter Soldier for an optimist.”

Tony murmurs, trying to fend off Bucky's clever mouth with one hand while keeping him close with the other (letting Bucky anchor him, even if he was a distracting little shit).

“The Winter Soldier assumed that Iron Man would never want him as anything more than a weapon. He was wrong. After that, Bucky Barnes decided good things can happen, especially when you’re involved.”

Bucky says, leaning back just enough to let Tony see his face (open and earnest and just devoted enough to be concerning. Tony was pretty sure that if anyone broke into the bunker, they'd be so thoroughly erased he'd never even know they were there in the first place. It's probably weird of him to be into that).

“I’ll try to believe that.”

Tony tells him, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a barely-there smile. He's still worried - he's worried about a lot of things. This new relationship with Bucky, how sure he was about it, how committed...

The aliens, space, the war landing on his doorstep-

His team, his kids-

“That's all I ask.”

Bucky says, lifting a hand to card through Tony's hair,

"Just try to believe you deserve good things."

Tony lets his eyes slip closed for a moment, savouring the sensation of somebody caring for him like this. Letting someone be there for him. Letting himself fall just a little harder (Tony Stark always fell too hard, too fast. Gravity. It was the one thing that clung to him no matter what, no matter how
much he fought-).

“I’m gonna get back to work.”

Tony says eventually, gnawing anxiously on his lower lip. Bucky watches the movement like a predator, then shakes his head and smiles (a little bittersweet), heading out. He pauses in the doorway, though, making Tony's heart thump unevenly in his chest.

"Hey, Tony?"

He calls out, all faux-innocence and mischief, not at all trustworthy.

"Yeah?"

Tony responds, like an absolute idiot. He's spent enough time with Bucky now to know he should ignore him when he gets that tone in his voice. Has called him out on being full of shit with it before - that or about to do something that would make even a heathen like himself blush.

“I love you. Just wanted you to know.”

Bucky says. The door whispers shut behind him, but Tony doesn't even hear it. Doesn't hear anything over the rush of blood in his ears.

A new heart condition. Bucky was going to give him one. This was how he was going to die - he just knew it.

Chapter End Notes

Tony (Repeatedly): *accidentally flirts with Bucky*
Tony (Repeatedly): *intentionally pushes Bucky's buttons*
Tony (Repeatedly): *makes Bucky blush*
Bucky (Once): *intentionally reduced Tony to a lovestruck mess*
Tony: What have I ever done to deserve this?
Rhodey: You have never done anything wrong in your life
Rhodey: I know this, and I love you-

EDIT: Now there's a "growing old together" after epilogue/ficlet for Tony and Bucky on my tumblr here: http://purgatoryandme.tumblr.com/post/173693166758/thank-you-for-the-filtering-tips-as-for-the-offer

DOUBLE EDIT: There is also an exchange of "I love you"s ficlet here: http://purgatoryandme.tumblr.com/post/174070627153/in-im-what-is-tonys-reaction-to-when-bucky

Works inspired by this one: destroya, we're all waiting for ya by rosewitchx
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!