Beloved

by Winterstar

Summary

The theory of unification...

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Back in his day, the idea was just a fantasy. Soul mates and soul packs weren't real, they were fairy tales told to soothe scared children in the dark. Yet the reality of soul bonds scarred his wrist and Steve had to come to terms with a future confounded with a fantasy turned to reality. The brand on his wrist designated he was the leader of the rarest kind of soul bond - the soul pack. The universe would select his pack mates and he would designate their roles, from sentinel, to guide, to beloved and more. The moment Tony Stark knocked on his apartment door and proposed they bond everything would change for Steve. Just not in the way he thought it would.

Notes

A quick word on the timeline. I have placed the events of Dr. Strange happening before first Avengers movie. This is important for the development of the soul bonds and how they work.

From The Avengers through Captain America: The Winter Soldier all of the events occur.
After that, the story diverges.

This story is drafted to completion. Revisions will be made and chapters may be added.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Soul pack?”

Fury gave him a one-eyed glare that tried to beam its way into Steve’s resolve. It didn’t work. Instead, he gave up and simply shrugged. “Lots of things have changed, Cap.”

Steve sat up in the conference room. They’d gathered at the SHIELD New York City base, just this side of Manhattan. Since the moment it happened, Steve felt a little nauseous and shaky but he wasn’t certain that it had anything to do with his health and all to do with his introduction into this future – present – whatever. One thing he was sure of – his wrist ached. Ached like he was the sixteen-year-old kid again and sickly with the flu. He tugged on his uniform, trying to hide the markings. Overall, the future might be impressive in some things, but other things left a lot to be desired.

Glancing around the room, his focus stopped at the man with the ridiculous cape and medallion around his neck. He considered the man and then went back to Fury. “You keep saying that, but all I can figure is that the future kind of went a little off its rocker.”

“If you mean nuts, Cap – well, you got that right.” That came from Stark as he waltzed into the room. The rest of the Initiative followed him – Natasha, Clint, and Bruce. Thor was still off world seeking justice against his brother and his deeds. Of course they’d all be summoned if this craziness that Fury spouted rang with any truth at all.

“So when did all this magic infestation happen?” Steve asked and he could not believe for a minute that he was actually asking such an insane question. But just a few days ago he was fighting aliens – from outer space. Maybe he wasn’t awake just yet. Maybe this was all some induced dying dream or something. The phantoms of his nightmares during his time in the ice still chased him.

“It’s not an infestation,” the caped wonder said. His stare hardened like crystal. “Magic has always been part of the universe. Believe me, I was as surprised as any other.” He dragged a finger along the
table, leaving not a streak of oil in the polish but instead a lingering flare of magic. “It’s part of a bigger world, a larger universe we’re only now starting to truly understand.”

“So if it’s always been around, why haven’t we heard about it before?” Natasha asked. She eyed Hawkeye as she spoke as if he might hold some unspoken truths to be shared. He stayed back, away from the crowd and hunched in on himself.

“It has been well concealed, except for a few momentary missteps. Humanity has been blissfully unaware,” the caped man said.

“And who might you be, Mister Magician?” Tony cut in. He looked like he didn’t have time for this crap and Steve could sympathized. But where Tony was clearly frustrated, Steve only felt another wave of overwhelming loneliness for his own time.

“I’m Doctor Strange. I was once one of the top neurosurgeons in the world until I had an accident,” the doctor said. He didn’t explain more. He let that drop and turned to the current topic. “I recently fought a cosmic evil and thus probably am responsible for unleashing the wave of magic besotting the world.”

“And a soul pack is?” Steve asked again.

“From what we understand,” Fury said as he stepped in to explain, “soul packs are rare but have been popping up from time to time.”

“When I fought Dormammu I changed the course of time and everything that was in it. History was changed. Soul bonding has been around since the beginning of time, but the battle I fought changed how humanity perceives it. Before it was that couple that married for fifty years and were still in love, and then die within days of each other.”

“SHIELD has been studying the vital statistics of it for a while. SHIELD scientists started to investigate the existence outside of the myths and theories. Soul packs are even rarer than simple soul bonds,” Fury said.

“Even back in your day Captain, they appeared. Surely you understand that as there were bands of brothers during the war,” Doctor Strange said as his stare bore into Steve. “Though no one really understood it that way, nor did it mark as overtly as it does now. It’s hypothesized that some of the magic leaking into the world may have linked these friends, these troops, together into a pack through their interdimensional energies.”

“Now I know this is a bunch of bullshit,” Tony said but Bruce hushed him and pulled out a chair, sitting down to listen.

“A soul pack is a group of people with a common cause,” Strange said. He inhaled, exhaled as if the entire meeting bored him. “It binds them together through – well, let’s just use souls. Bound together they are a unit, a living breathing unit.”

“So how does this explain,” Steve started but then couldn’t finish.

“The brand on your wrist?” Strange said. “It means, Captain, that you will have a soul pack. Soul bonds between two people haven’t shown the elaborate markings. Soul pack markings are much more overt. Your soul pack members could be the Avengers. It could be someone else in the future. Your energy is aligned as the leader. The leader always gets the brand around the left wrist. As each member connects to your soul, you and the member will get a brand to signify them. Each member has a different definition, a different purpose. When you know it, at the moment you say it, they will
be branded as will you.”

“This sounds like a lot of hogwash,” Tony said and ruffled his hands through his hair. “Is anyone else really listening to this crap?”

“Is it so unbelievable that the existence of soul bonds and soul packs has eluded the human consciousness and knowledge? Magic, what I do, is not accepted by Western civilizations. I didn’t accept it when I first encountered it. You’ve heard the word soulmate but just shrugged it off as a fairy tale. Not so. The timeline changed and with it, the reality of what soulmates are. They are real.”

Bruce put his hand up but the contemplation on his face told a different story. “Many Eastern philosophies believe in the mystical spirit of the soul. So maybe-.”

Tony spun around and scowled at Bruce. “Really? Are you listening to yourself? You’re a scientist.”

“As was I,” Strange interrupted. “I assure you, Stark, I doubted as well. But the idea that there are forces outside our comprehension, that we exist behind the mere four dimensions, that we can tap it, is true. As I said, I can assure you of these facts.”

With that Tony confronted Steve. “Well, Cap, what do you say? You sprained your wrist and now we’re all in a mystical, magical, wolf pack together?”

Steve frowned and shook his head. “I didn’t sprain my wrist. It just-.”

“Well then, let’s see it.” That was Hawkeye who still hung back in the room in the shadows as if he didn’t want to be seen or spoken to – Steve could understand the archer had a difficult road ahead of him after Loki’s mind invasion.

Steve glanced at Fury and the Director only lifted a brow at him. With no other recourse, Steve tugged up his cuff and placed his arm on the table. He half hoped it wasn’t there. When it appeared this morning it literally caused him to fall on his knees. He’d thought his hand had been severed from his wrist. But no – just a brand, marking the circumference of his wrist. He’d gone to medical. The serum shouldn’t have allowed it to happen – but it did.

And it didn’t go away, as was evidenced by the intertwining welts on his wrist.

Fury commented, “It’ll take a few days, maybe less for you, for the swelling to go down and the marking to gain color. But it’s true.”

Each of the other members of the Avengers studied the mark on Steve’s skin. It wove around his wrist, hot to the touch still, red and purple along the bones and flesh of his arm. Tony and Bruce seemed the most interested while Natasha only gave it a passing glance and dismissed it. That was a curious reaction that caused Steve to focus on her rather than the two people leaning over the table, arguing what the brand on his arm might mean.

“It just appeared,” Bruce muttered.

“How freaking strange is that?” Tony replied and poked at Steve.

Steve only grimaced at him in response, but then Doctor Strange joined them and considered the marking. “It is the mark of the soul. He’ll choose his pack in the next few years.”

“Years?” Tony said and that surprise in his voice perked up Steve’s interest. Of course, years seemed ridiculous to Steve too, but the fact that Tony showed any bit of concern about a process gave Steve a sense of satisfaction that he couldn’t parse.
“It could be days, or weeks, or years. Since the Captain doesn’t know a lot of people now, I would suspect it will take some time for his pack to settle.” Strange looked as if he was figuring out the puzzle as he spoke.

“And just what does this pack actually do?” Tony asked. Steve had to admit he felt some modicum of gratitude that Tony threw all the questions at Strange. Steve was still trying to figure out Keurigs and pocket phones; he’d only been awake a little over a week.

“It depends on the leader and the circumstances,” Strange said and left it at that. He turned to Steve. “It will be up to you. Since you have the brand of the leader, you will name each and every member.”

What Strange kept saying about naming and branding and picking just felt like a mush of confusion to Steve. “What? So I just pick them out?”

Strange pressed his lips together in a tight line. “No, I’m afraid it will come to the fore without your conscious knowledge of it. You will be in the middle of an interaction and you will speak the word. Both of you will be marked, tattooed with the brand. And you will be forever soul connected.”

“As simple as that?” Clint said and twisted further into the shadows of the room. “Great. Another way to fuck me up.”

“I’m not f-.” Steve stopped. “I’m not going to mess with anyone. I’m not doing that at all.”

Strange gave Steve a sardonic smile. It rubbed Steve all the wrong ways. “It won’t be up to you, Captain.” The doctor circled the table as if he stalked Steve, as if the problem intrigued him and didn’t appall him like it did Steve. “It will be a compulsion, Captain. You will not be able to deny it. You will name them, or you will suffer immeasurable pain as will they.”

Every part of Steve wanted to spit back Try me, and he almost did, but then Strange threw in the last part – about the other person or persons being afflicted as well. He swallowed down the anger, the growing panic, and instead asked, “How did this all happen? When did things change? When did you change the timeline and how come we don’t already know about soul packs?”

Tony had the audacity to laugh at him and Bruce only scowled at Tony in return, but it was Strange, again, who answered, “As I said, I am afraid this is all of my fault. Or is the result of me saving the universe and Earth. I cannot disclose when it happened. As for you not knowing that soulmates or soul bonds were a reality, as I said many facts in this world are labeled fake or a conspiracy theory. Soul packs happened as a result of what I did.”

“You did this on purpose?” Natasha asked while Fury surveyed them, watching their reactions.

Steve could have bet that the man relished the idea of this soul pack.

“Not in the least,” Strange said and settled to sit down next to Steve at the conference table. His eyes were like gems, faceted, sharp, almost cruel in their intent. He glanced around the room as if scrutinizing them all. “None of you were set aside outside the time loop so you would not know. The world is different, so very different now.”

“Perhaps you want to be a little less vague and -,” Tony flicked his fingers in a wave at Strange. “A little less that and tell us what the hell is going on.”

“Stark, you know about soul packs. You’ve heard of it happening before,” Fury said.

“Sure, I heard about them, Everyone has. But they are just kids stuff, made up legends and myths. Adults who still claimed it I thought everyone who had them were – just – you know, crazy.” Tony
frowned.

“No, not crazy at all,” Strange said as he peered at the braided welts on Steve’s wrist. “It happened when I fought Dormammu.”

“Door ma who?” Clint piped in.

“Dormammu. The eater of souls. From the dark dimension, Dormammu attacked Earth, and tried to nullify it. I stopped him, but as I did it – time and space changed. I believe because of it, the universe changed and the parameters transformed along with it. The whole of the universe changed and soul packs and mates became a reality. The world around you changed and you accepted it. Yet, the humanity doesn’t look at soul packs or mates as a real thing because they are still rare.”

“Physics doesn’t work that way,” Bruce muttered.

“This isn’t physics. Look beyond,” Strange replied but then he stared at Steve’s wrist as if it was one of the crown jewels of England. He grabbed Steve’s hand – his fingers hot like orange flames. “So very intricate. I’ve never seen the brand so very intricate.”

As he zeroed down on it, Steve yanked his arm away and pulled the cuff over the brand. “The serum will deal with it.”

Strange lounged backward in the chair. His index finger went to his lips. “Will it now, Captain? Are you so sure that the serum wasn’t fundamentally changed as well?”

“I wasn’t changed,” Steve said but the doubts rose like a festering need.

“If soul packs are possible, we all changed, Captain. Everyone within the time loop changed. The only one who didn’t was me,” Strange said and stood up. “Now I must take my leave. Good luck, and good day.”

Tony lifted a lip which only served to remind Steve of an old, mean dog that lived in the alley way behind his tenement house where he grew up in the 30s. He never would have believed that he would feel nostalgia for that dog. As Strange left, the rest of the Avengers lingered with Fury watching over them.

Clint grumbled, “That was as clear as mud. We’re supposed to believe him? I knew about soul mates and crap but everyone knows it just fairy tales.”

Natasha cocked her brow. “Do we?” Silence deafened them.

“So,” Tony said, breaking through their doubts. “Are you going to pick us like we’re all waiting to be picked for the team in P.E.? ‘Cause I don’t want to be last. I’m never last – for anything.”

“P.E.?” Steve asked.

Natasha chimed in. “Physical education.”

“P.E.?” Steve grimaced. Why did people need to be trained in physical education? His training consisted of getting beaten by bullies in back alleys. He shrugged; he guessed he understood it a little. “I don’t know? I guess?”

Tony looked affronted at Steve. “So, you don’t want to pick us?”
“I’m not even sure what this is. I don’t know how to pick anyone? Strange said it would just come to me,” Steve replied and his wrist hurt again, as if just being in their presence caused something to flicker and burn. He pulled the cuff of his sleeve up again and Bruce bent over his arm.

“That looks like a nasty burn.”

“It’ll work its way out, Captain.” Fury edged a little on the side of the table, his leather coat creaking as he sat down. “The pack will work its way out, I mean. Eventually, souls will connect and you’ll just designate each person of your pack with a title, a function.”

Steve eyed Fury. He accepted this whole state of affairs so easily. That spoke volumes. It meant that Fury had encountered things like this before.

“So what? I’ll be a resident genius. We have Legolas, and then there’s death by thighs over there,” Tony said.

“Watch it, Stark,” Natasha cautioned.

“Can I just do that now and get it over with?” Steve asked as Bruce started to poke around his wrist. It was more than annoying; it caused a persistent itch-like pain to flare.

Fury shook his head. “I’m not sure it works like that, Captain. I think the urgency, or need, will happen and you’ll just say it. You won’t be able to stop from what I understand. You will, in fact, by instinct and nature connect. You can’t make it happen.”

“None of this makes sense, but I get it,” Clint said and that didn’t clear up a damned thing.

What cleared everything up was Bruce. He happened to touch Steve’s wrist, the heated band of welted flesh and Steve hissed. Not from the touch, not from any pain on his wrist, but from something inside. Something horrible and beautiful. An ache so true and pure that he shuddered in its wake. He clutched the edge of the table with his other hand, hearing the wood crack and splinter even as he watched Bruce fall away and groan. The scientist grabbed his own wrist and wilted to his knees.

Within Steve the agony grew, toying with both a reconciliation and a deep yearning. His eyes watered and blurred out the vision of the rest of the team crouching over them. Steve realized he’d fallen to the floor. Bruce tumbled further, rocking as he did while Natasha screamed out a warning.

Steve looked up, spotted her, but his brain forced him back to Bruce. The word spilled out and it felt like relief. “Healer.” The sizzle of a brand on his forearm linked to the pain in his chest as the word forced itself out of his mouth. Bruce yelled in response as he clawed at his arm and Tony yelled for his suit.

Even as Steve met Bruce’s green gaze, he knew it was finished. There was no turning back, and if the serum couldn’t stop it in Steve, then the faulty serum that caused Bruce to turn into the Hulk wouldn’t be able to stop the course of nature. A nature that seemed so out of place for Steve. The brand was done.

Bruce raged up onto his knees as his forearm showed the same mark that Steve now sported in addition to the brand bracelet. It curved into concentric circles and speared through with green. Steve thought it was ironic and trite but none of that mattered as Bruce transformed – the Hulk bursting free and launching at Steve. Scrambling to his feet, Steve lurched away but the chairs and the rest of the Avengers were in the way. He toppled but the Hulk easily seized him by his neck and squeezed. Steve slammed his fist into the Hulk’s face to little affect. It only served to cause the beast to howl.
and grip his fist tighter around Steve’s neck.

With little oxygen and almost no time to stop him, Steve lifted up his wrist and touched his healer brand to the Hulk’s tattoo. Why he did it, he had no idea – it felt more like instinct. He couldn’t speak, because the hand around his throat squeezed out all of his air, but this little motion, this action meant more. Somehow Steve knew it would. When the brands touched, the Hulk stopped mid-scream. The team members around them, Tony armored up, Hawkeye with bow and arrow drawn, Natasha with electrical rods at the ready, and Fury pointing a Glock at the Hulk, all paused as well. The shock wave hit them as the brands merged and a primal message, wordless but more profound, anchored Steve and the Hulk. The monster eased Steve to the floor, opened up his hand, and then simply lost hold of his form and shifted back to being Bruce just as quickly as it happened.

Steve rubbed at his neck and coughed. The rest of the team came to order and, when Steve signed for them to stand down, they did. Bruce curled in on himself and, as Steve approached, shied away even more. Steve tried to offer some kind of comfort with his words, but what could he say? He understood so little of the new world around him – so much less than he originally thought.

Still in the armor, Tony flipped open the faceplate and said, “Well, at least we know how it happens now.”

“That’s all you got to say, Stark?” Natasha groused and Clint flinched. He stayed clear of Steve as Bruce wrapped his arms around himself and climbed to his feet, his torn pants not providing much modesty.

“Bruce, I-.” Steve started and stopped when he saw the red of Bruce’s eyes. He looked as if he mourned yet another choice taken away from him. Steve’s throat felt dry. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Bruce said with a nod. “Yeah.” He shook his head then and muttered, “I’m really not that kind of doctor. I’m not a healer.”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. He shrugged. He didn’t pick the word; it just bubbled out of his mouth. “I just- I don’t know.”

Fury took charge and, for once, Steve was happy he didn’t have to order the team and figure out what their next move might be. “Okay, show’s over. We’d like you and Doctor Banner in the infirmary immediately for confirmation tests.”

“What?” Tony said. “We’re not all going to touch him now and get labeled?”

“It doesn’t always work that way – there has to be intent,” Fury said.

“I didn’t intend anything,” Steve spoke and it was true. If this nightmare future would just go away and maybe Steve could slip back into a dreamless (or not so dreamless) sleep he’d be fine.

Bruce squinted at Steve. “Not dreamless?” His mutter startled Steve and he only shook his head.

“What?” Natasha said but both Bruce and Steve remained mum. She rolled her eyes at them but then Steve hustled to leave the conference room, heading toward the infirmary. He didn’t need anyone else listening in on his thoughts. Would this future just leave him be for a little bit?

Eventually, the team lost interest – or Fury growled at them and they were dismissed to leave both Bruce and Steve in the midst of a flurry of doctors and nurses checking on them. Steve sat across from Bruce on a gurney. Bruce, now clothed in scrubs, tried not to meet Steve’s gaze. The idea that Bruce might be in his head all the time, terrified him. So Steve tried to send thoughts to Bruce or at least read something in his mind. He got nothing for it. Was that a blessing or a curse? Steve had no
The nurse checked their vitals and hooked them up to several monitors, half of which Steve still couldn’t name. He itched to get out of the infirmary, go back to his apartment, and try and forget the last 70 years happened. Once the nurses and the doctors filtered away, Bruce cleared his throat and declared, “You know, I’m not that kind of doctor.”

Steve bobbed his head. “So you said.”

“But you called me healer?” Bruce lifted his arm to show the swirl with the dart of green through it. It didn’t remind Steve of any symbol he was familiar with, but then again he supposed magic and the universe didn’t adhere to human forged symbols and representations.

“Well, it did.”

“It?” Bruce asked.

“I don’t know. The universe?” Steve waved around his head. “Magic. Whatever?” He cringed. “I’m not sure. It wasn’t me. If I could have fought it off, I would have. I promise you that.”

“Oh,” Bruce said and there was a genuine vibration of disappointment.

“I don’t mean to say I wouldn’t pick you,” Steve said. That sounded too straight for Steve but it wasn’t like he understood the lingo today any more than he understood how magic worked. “I don’t mean that. I don’t know.”

“I get it,” Bruce said. The silence dropped over them and all Steve could hear was the little beeps and the whispered awe of the doctors outside the curtain. He couldn’t stand it.

“I want to leave,” Steve said and then realized he’d said it out loud.

Bruce folded his hands in his lap. “You know, before this I was in India. Minding my own business.”

“So you said.”

“And now,” Bruce said and sighed. “Now, I’m back. He’s back. And I have to deal with it.”

They both had to deal with it. But they didn’t. Steve didn’t. In short order, they were dismissed after all of the tests confirmed what they already knew: Bruce had linked up to Steve as the first of his pack. It put Steve on edge that SHIELD must have been experimenting with identifying packs, because how else would they have the instruments to do it? Steve could have lingered, but he was a man of action more than one of discussion and debate. He slipped out of the headquarters for SHIELD in Manhattan and found his way back to his apartment. It wasn’t much of a place and had a decided tilt toward brown and beige as far as decorating was concerned. He stayed there only because SHIELD paid for it. It was a temporary situation. Boxes in the corner attested to that since Steve was scheduled to move to Washington DC to start his new job with SHIELD.

Once home, Steve pretended not to worry about it, not to feel the constant twitch on his arm. The nurses and doctors might have confirmed that he was metaphysically connected to Bruce, but that told him nothing. They had tests – that’s what Fury had said. But it made no sense. If they had scientific tests to show that the soul linkage was there, didn’t that make it a part of nature and not magic. And the idea of SHIELD with all of their power knowing how to identify packs and mates brought with it an undercurrent of deceit. It hurt his head even to think about it. He made himself some coffee and sat in the darkening room with the files of his friends still on the side table. He
should put everything away. Pack it all away and forget about the past. Because he’d been damned
to the future.

He thought about the plane, crashing it, the cold rush of water, and death or not death. The fleeting
memories of a frigid hell, thinking he’d gone to hell and the dark gloom of the ocean his eternal
damnation. It was a wonder he hadn’t lost his mind entirely. But maybe he had and this whole thing
was a delusion. A knock jogged him out of his thoughts. He put down the files and went to open the
door. Before it was even cracked, Stark pushed his way into the apartment, spun on his heel, and
grimaced. Just his suit alone would have bankrupted Steve back in the day.

“Lord, this is beige,” Tony said and then tossed away the idea of Steve’s apartment as if it was a
throwaway like everything else in society these days. “So I thought we could get this over with and
not have to deal with SHIELD’s shit.”

“Deal with?” Steve didn’t think of himself as a knucklehead, but this Tony Stark – Howard Stark’s
son – put him on edge. An edge that became the line between the past and the future. He teetered on
it, ready any minute to fall, or to leap depending on the moment of the day.

“You know, the damned soul pack thing. I think we should just all – you know – get selected,
touched – which is kind of pervy in a way – but it seems like the right thing to do, right?” Tony said
and smiled. Except it didn’t feel like a smile, it felt like it was some kind of judgement. It crawled
over Steve’s skin like worms. How did he learn to smile like that?

“What?”

“It would be best, don’t you think?” Tony stood there, not moving in the center of Steve’s beige and
brown living room.

“Best?” His mind slowly moved through the words, trudging with a weight he couldn’t fathom. But
he did catch up with them and finally said, “You want to try the soul pack thing?”

“Yeah, don’t you think? We could do it now and then you could – you know – go with the rest of
the team and get them all selected.” The way Tony stood in the bland apartment, expectant, made the
brown seem not so dull and earthy. It also irritated Steve.

“I don’t think that’s how this works,” Steve replied. He wanted Tony out; he had things to do like
pack and go to DC and forget that he woke up seventy years in the future to fight aliens- from
OUTER SPACE.

“Then how does it work?” Tony asked, his own annoyance ringing clear as a bell. “Because I don’t
see any books lying around here telling you about your newly found ability. And what?” He spun on
his heels. “No computer, not a surprise, but no computer. So you obviously haven’t done any of the
homework.”

“I’ve been here less than an hour since this morning’s meeting,” Steve responded and that just
irritated him even more. He didn’t need to justify anything to Stark. “You want to do this, sure.
Okay. Tell me how?” He just wanted Stark to get out of his hair.

Tony stopped and stared at Steve as if the acquiescence stunned him. He scratched at his head,
 messing his perfectly coifed hair a bit. Clearing his throat, he cocked an eyebrow and then said,
“Okay then. Let me see the brand thing.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “The brand thing?” He tugged up the cuff of his shirt for Tony to see the wrist
markings and the new marking that symbolized Bruce. Why the hell the universe decided to link him
to Bruce – and first – seemed so out of line and character that Steve really didn’t trust this whole magical, dimensional or whatever soul pack thing at all. “I’m all for it.” Why not? The universe decided to play with him in some kind of screwy way. Again.

Tony considered Steve as if he was weighing whether or not Steve might belt him one if he got close enough to study the brand. But Steve didn’t move. He just stood there with his arm stretched out and the horrible reality of a wrist band revealed on his flesh – his skin that shouldn’t tarnish anymore because of the serum. Tony eyed him once more, and then stepped up and looked at the brand. Nothing really happened. They just stood there.

“Did you feel anything when Bruce was checking it out?” Tony said. He hadn’t touched Steve at all.

“No,” Steve said after he’d thought about it. “Not at all. Nothing really happened until he touched it.”

Tony made a small hmm sound and then tilted his head as he examined the brand, both the wristlet and the swirl with the green dagger representing Bruce. After a full minute, Steve sighed and said, “Are you going to do it or not?”

Tony stood up straight and narrowed his eyes at Steve. “Well, excuse me if I’m a little hesitant to bond myself to someone that ruined my childhood.”

Steve furrowed his brows. “How could I possibly ruin your childhood when I wasn’t even alive. I was in the ice.”

“Oh, you found some very creative ways,” Tony spat back. That sounded all kinds of wrong but Steve couldn’t find the energy care. He was sure then that if he spoke a soul bond word for Tony it would be villain, enemy, adversary. They’d been only the barest of teammates during the whole invasion and attack on New York. Sure, Steve was happy to see that Tony was alive after he’d fallen from the sky. But the truth was, so far, Tony mixed with Steve as well as oil and water. It might be an old cliché but it was accurate as hell.

Steve yanked his arm away. “Fine then.” He walked into the small galley kitchen in the apartment that also served as the hallway to the single bedroom and bath. “You can go - I have a lot to get done.”

Tony had the audacity to laugh. “Do? You have a lot to do? In your beige and boring apartment?” He turned around and glanced over the non-descript place without pictures on the walls, with taupe colored couches, and dark wood tables. Nothing but brown or versions of it.

Steve went to the box in the kitchen that had nothing in it at all. “I’m packing. I’m moving to DC at the end of the week.”

“Moving,” Tony muttered and then fell silent. Steve hadn’t a clue as to how to interpret Tony’s reaction. He seemed less stunned or curious but more solemn as if he hadn’t considered that the team wouldn’t end up disappearing and dissolving after the Battle of New York. “Really?”

Steve nodded and then crossed his arms. “I’m being assigned to the DC office of SHIELD. The Triskelion.”

“Oh, that big ugly building in DC. I know it, you’ll love it,” Tony said. To that Steve only grimaced, but Tony persisted. “So you’re going to play the politics game?”

“No,” Steve returned. “Going to serve my country.”
“Like that worked the first time,” Tony said and Steve swallowed down the urge to spit back a reply. He just wanted the man out of his home.

“Are we going to do this or are you going to stand there and continue to insult my life choices?” Steve said and waited. He didn’t really have much more to pack – his life could be contained in a box and a duffle bag if he was honest with himself.

“Do you want a soul bond with me?” Tony asked and his eyes were light and expectant, again.

Steve filtered through his answers. But there really wasn’t one that suited Tony or this whole situation. “I have to be honest. I don’t want this soul pack thing at all. When I grew up it was just a fantasy, but now I find out that those memories are fake, put in my head by a new timeline? I don’t want a soul bond because it’s part of this fake future to me. I don’t have any interest in being soul bonded to Bruce.”

“Do you feel Bruce?” Tony asked and that seemed like a genuine question.

“Not really,” Steve said. He didn’t admit that Bruce kind of, maybe read his mind. “I don’t have any idea what the point of all of this is. I haven’t really looked any of it up. I just kind of figured it would sort itself out.”

“That’s really how you’re going to tackle this? I thought you were some master strategist and tactician.” Tony sidled up to him, close enough to touch but not.

“Not on magical stuff, and-.” He glanced toward the window of his apartment, hearing the racket below – the streets of a city that was his home and his prison. “The future.”

Tony regarded him then, his demeanor shifting from confrontational to more studied and considerate. “Well, let’s say we soul bond. What then?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Steve said. “You’ve been around a lot longer than I have. I’m assuming that this soul bond stuff is something known.”

“I know as much as you do with the new memories plopped in my head. And like I said I thought only kooks thought it was real.” Tony watched him for a few seconds and then pulled out his phone. “Here. Let me pull up some information for you.” He tapped on the phone and then handled it to Steve. “This is one of those conspiracy sites about it. Apparently the governments of the world have kept this pretty close to the vest.”

A read out on the phenomena of soul packs scrolled past. Steve gulped down the panic as he read it.

*Soul packs are intimate bonds amongst a group of people that are stronger than family or friends. Soulers or packers are considered rare and, in some countries, have been declared illegal or immoral.*

“Does intimate mean like – what I think it does?” Because he really couldn’t consider the thought of having sex with Bruce or maybe the Hulk – that terrified him.

“Keep reading.” Tony pointed to the phone as he strolled around the apartment.

*Soul packs are not based on any blood bond or sexual bond. Some soulers do end up interacting in a sexual matter but most soul packs have a leader and a designated pack member called a lover or in the rarest case a beloved.*

He relaxed a degree and Tony coughed out a laugh. “No, you don’t have to do the big guy.”
Steve frowned but went back to the phone’s display, reading it aloud. “Most soul packs have specific characters or roles. Leader, sentinel, friend, confidant, guide, lover (beloved). Soul packs are ever evolving and could take up to five years to form.” He inhaled, held it to steady his nerves, and then exhaled. “Five years.” He continued to read.

“Packs can be up to ten members, with various membership names chosen by the leader. The leader will get a tattoo or soul mark for each member. Some soul marks are more intricate than others. Some leaders are branded on the arm and chest.” He didn’t relish having marks all over his body at all. It seemed since the Rebirth project, Steve’s body wasn’t his own anymore.

“Keep reading.” Tony waited his hands in his pockets.

“Soul packs are all different. Some soul packs function with the ability to communicate without spoken words. The secrecy of how soul packs work has led to myths and fairy tales about them. This has led to some nations conscripting these packs into service of the country’s needs. Other soul packs are more intimately involved with understanding emotions and supporting one another.” That would be nice, but then again, Steve wasn’t sure he liked the idea of anyone in his head. At least not these days. His head mixed emotions so fast he felt like he was on the rollercoaster at Coney Island again. “The rarest soul pack shares all communication and emotion. The more soul packs are in contact with one another, the stronger the bonds.”

“I suppose all the conspiracy theorists were right about this shit.” Tony said. “SHIELD wants you to bond with their spies so that you end up like them. And then they will use you.”

“That sounds a little nefarious to me,” Steve replied.

“It’s a spy organization. What did you think?” Tony said. “They are probably jumping up and down with glee that you bonded to Bruce – the Hulk – already. Now you can control him and bring him on ops and cause all kinds of issues.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Steve said.

“That’s what you think.” Tony shook his head. “They are waiting to control you, Cap. That’s the short of it. They want you under their thumb. You go there, they control the soul pack.”

“You’re starting to sound like a conspiracy theorist yourself.”

“Tell me you’re not curious why Fury knows so much about soul packs. How SHIELD can test to confirm. They are using soul packs and spreading lies that it’s just a myth. They want to control you.”

“No one is going to control me,” Steve said. No one could ever control Steve, not Bucky, not Peggy, and especially not the US Army. SHIELD was nothing in comparison. “I’m going. I need the job.”

“Tell you what, I will give you a job if we do this now. I will make you feel useful and you can do important things in the world,” Tony said and waved his hand as if he indicated the entirety of the existence. “Do this and you don’t have to worry about looking over your shoulder.”

“Oh you’ll make sure I’m useful?” Steve spat back.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Settling his conflicted emotions, Steve shook his head. “And if I bond to you and I still want to go to SHIELD?” Steve asked with his arms crossed over his chest.
“I will haunt you with very chaotic and slightly perverted thoughts until you come back to your senses,” Tony said. “Listen, we’re supposed to be the Avengers, and we are the good guys. I want to be a good guy, don’t you?”

“I thought I was?” Truth be told, he had no idea what he was or what anything else was anymore. This soul pack thing had thrown him and he still couldn’t find solid ground to stand on and to figure out what the next thing he needed to do was.

“Okay, sure.”

That didn’t sound convincing at all. SHIELD seemed pretty balanced, but then again, Steve had only been awake a little over a week. What the hell did he know? “What if I told you it didn’t matter? I’m going to go to work for SHIELD because I want to.”

“No one works for SHIELD because they want to, Cap,” Tony said and sighed. He took the phone from Steve and dialed back on what Steve thought was his sales pitch. “I guess we’re not doing this.”

“I don’t think it should be forced,” Steve said. He knew he was trying to smooth over any hurt feelings.

“We’re the Avengers, an initiative to protect the world. You don’t think that’s important enough to bond with all of the members and put away your ideas of being a hero for a nebulous organization?” Tony tilted his head and waited, as if his argument couldn’t possibly be destroyed.

Tony was banking on Steve being frightened or doubtful of SHIELD. Yet, Steve had always been doubtful and questioning of anyone he’d ever worked for even the grocery down at the end of the block when he was in his teenage years. His mother would roll her eyes and sigh dramatically when Steve would come home raging about prices and fighting for a single penny in change. Steve came back to the moment. “It is important, but I am not sure it will work out like you think it will.”

“It might, we could try. That’s all I’m saying.”

They’d come full circle, but that’s what he did with Stark. They’d discuss, fight, debate, disagree, and then finally come back to the discussion points again. It was hard to imagine that they’d only know each other for less than a fortnight. If he wanted to get on with his packing (what little there was) Steve had one avenue and one avenue only. “Okay then. Let’s do this.”

“Ah! You almost sound modern,” Tony said and there was a twinkle in his eyes that somehow made Steve blush far too much. Tony snickered in response and that just made Steve want to punch him. Thankfully, the object of his ire proceeded without any knowledge of Steve’s annoyance. “So, how did it happen with Bruce?”

Steve put away his embarrassment at his blush and turned to the matters at hand. “Bruce was studying the wrist band, and then he touched it, kind of a light rub.”

“That was it?”

Steve nodded. He stretched out his bared arm again, waiting. The thought of being forever linked to Stark was not high on his list of things to do in the new millennium, but the fact was that he didn’t want to be linked to Hulk or anyone for that matter. So he might as well get this over with and find out if Stark was designated his pain in the ass or whatnot.

Tony reached out and touched Steve’s wrist. At first it was just a touch, nothing more. Steve waited, Tony looked up at Steve. That anxious, almost eager, stare disturbed Steve but he kept his mouth
shut. Not dissuaded, Tony brushed his finger along the inside of Steve’s wrist, along the welt and closer to the pulse point. The touch lingered and then something light and tender began within Steve. He felt it in the core of his body, deep in his torso. If he’d spent any time thinking about what happened with Bruce, he would qualify this as similar to the moment preceding the bond. Like the lightest of rain pattering down before the storm, it began in his core, then blossomed up through his heart and then part of Steve – part of him reached out – farther – toward him – toward Tony – and then –

Stopped.

Nothing.

No words. No feelings. No bond.

“Oh.” That was all Tony said.

The disappointment and pain written plainly on his face. He tried to hide it, to put up the shields of fake smiles and casual shrugs, but it didn’t work. The smile turned into a horrible grimace of disillusionment. The shrug transformed into a tenseness, a rigid demeanor as Tony snatched his hand away. He practically snarled at Steve. “Why did I think it would be anything different? You ruined my childhood. Why wouldn’t you ruin my adulthood?”

Wordless. Steve only opened his hands and shook his head.

“Just-.” Tony put a hand to his forehead and then closed his eyes only briefly. When he looked up at Steve all friendliness (however small) had disappeared replaced by unbridled loathing. “Just go to DC and make friends with those – those spineless bureaucrats like my father.” He huffed and looked up and down at Steve. “Captain America, huh. I thought you would be taller.” He marched out of the door, slamming it closed.

Steve stood there for several minutes alternating between hot and cold. Finally, he found his voice. “Sorry.” But there was no one there to hear it and Steve felt all the lonelier for it.
Escape

Chapter Summary

Tony tries to escape the hurt.

Of course, Captain America, the man about whom his father could not shut up for years and years, would disappoint Tony. Of course, he wouldn’t pick Tony, because the saintly Steve Rogers was too good for Tony, far above him in every way. He probably never even fucked anyone because who would be good enough for Steve Rogers anyhow? No one. Tony knew everything about Steve Rogers, from his shoe size to his birthday (okay everyone knew that) to his favorite color. He’d watched all of the movies – the ones that Steve Rogers made as Captain America and the ones made about Steve Rogers’ life and deeds. Tony read every comic book and even all of the historical biographies.

He pretended to be Captain America as a child, even went as his idol for several Halloweens. The pride he took in making his own shield for trick or treating energized him the entire night as his mother doting on him. Yet, as far as his father was concerned, it was all for naught. His father would grumble and scowl at him; nothing Tony ever did seemed to please the man. So Tony tore down all the posters, got rid of the Captain America sheets, burned his comic books, and laughed at his father when the idiot went looking for Rogers again – decades after the man had put a plane in the cold ocean waters.

“He’s obsessed, Mom,” Tony had said when his mother asked him to tone it down. She stood by her piano as Tony tossed his math books on the couch. He was in high school at the ripe old age of ten years old. It bored him to pieces.

“It’s the one thing he failed at, Anthony. You don’t understand,” his mother responded, but he glimpsed a sadness in her eyes as if she knew that she would never take first place in her husband’s heart. And Tony hated Steve Rogers all the more.

So why was it decades later he asked for the fool to bond with him? It had nothing to do with his childish hero worship and everything to do with fucking Natasha’s profile on Tony as Iron Man. It haunted him, that profile. Nearly kept him off the Avengers, but Fury eventually broke down and called Tony in because Iron Man could do the job no one else could. Hell, he didn’t even need the rest of the Avengers. They were superfluous anyway. Who needs someone with a hammer? A carpenter, that’s who. Oh, and a guy with a bow? That’s useful in a gun (laser and bomb) fight. Let’s not even talk about an unarmed guy with a shield or a chick with killer thighs. Useless. The only one of the team that might be functional was Hulk, and he was a dimwit. It’s like Bruce ate all the brain power and left Hulk with toddler brain syndrome. What a useless pack of nobodies.

Tony could do better alone. He didn’t need the Avengers, and he sure as hell didn’t need a soul pack. Why did the drive home feel like every fucking P.E. class he took in grade school where no one fucking picked him for dodgeball or baseball or basketball? He was always last and no one ever cared about his ability to play. Oh, and they loved him in dodgeball. His own fucking team threw the ball at him to get him out immediately and bench him.

He got back to the Tower in a pissy mood only to be greeted by Pepper who kept talking about moving back to California. She didn’t much like New York City. Sure, she liked the fashion and the
cafes and the museums, but she hated the rush of the city and the coldness that came with that rush. She wanted to feel the sun and be in the mansion by the warm Pacific Ocean. The Hudson and the Atlantic were too cold for her.

But they’d only just begun the plans to remodel and fix the Tower. She’d gone over them with him only a day or so ago. They’d planned out the floors, given each Avenger their own floor and put together an area for training and another lounge for relaxing. The whole new design would be spectacular in classic Stark fashion, but it wasn’t spectacular. Not anymore. He didn’t want them around. He didn’t want to be anywhere near pain in the ass Capsicle. Who wanted to associate with someone from his grandpa’s generation who seriously had a stick up his ass? He should just wipe clean the ideas for the Tower remodel and put it back to business and rental space. He was a business man after all, not just a philanthropist. He needed to make money to be able to keep giving it away.

When Pepper asked again to transfer their residence back to Malibu as he walked in the door, Tony couldn’t say no. “When?”

“When?” she asked. She stood in the middle of one of the few upper floors that were not decimated by the battle. They’d been using it as their living quarters.

“When do you want to go? Now? Tomorrow? Because I’m ready.”

“Oh?” Pepper said and stood there a little stunned and wide eyed. She stammered over her words before she finally got them out. “I didn’t expect you would agree. Now. You know with the Avengers’ responsibilities and all?”

“The Avengers can eat my shit. Do you think we’re going to be a team and avenging all the time? Do you think this is a cartoon land where evil reptiles and robots will attack New York City all the time? No,” Tony said and tried to quell his rising anger. “No, this is just life. It’s done. I’m done. Let’s go back to Malibu.”

“Really?” Her smile made it all worth it. That and the idea that he didn’t have to face the stupid team that would probably become a soul pack without him. Pepper’s smile reminded him of the sun over the Pacific as it set, her hair like the melting of the sun into the water’s horizon. Everything was better with Pepper. Why did he always have to try and undermine his own happiness by looking elsewhere?

Speaking of which, Tony nodded. “Yes. Make the plans.” He kissed her on the cheek and then squeezed her hands. “Do you know if Bruce stopped by?”

“Bruce?” She crinkled her nose and then frowned. “I think he’s down on the research floor you assigned him. I don’t really know. Am I supposed to keep tabs on him? I can have JARVIS assigned to it.”

His mind already leapt past her, and he should have learned his lesson not to do that to her. She had been his anchor for so many years, and he always took her for granted. He shouldn’t but he was a captive of his own intellect, talent, and emotional brain and never could resist it. So he kissed her cheek again and started back to the elevator, waving his fingers behind him.

“Get the packing going. We should leave.” He knew he sounded like an ass ordering her around, but he’d back it up to her later. Buy her something, or get some art. Or something. He didn’t wait to hear her plans or to answer where he’d gone. Instead he rode the elevator down to Bruce’s research floor and ended up not finding anyone at all. He did find a lot of broken glassware and a centrifuge that had a huge fist print in the side wall of it. Maybe having a guy that could turn into the Hulk at any given moment 32 floors up wasn’t the grandest idea he’d ever had in his life.
He glanced around, surveying the damage. Yet another floor he needed to renovate and fix. He didn’t really mind it too much and his brain already started to grapple with Hulk-proof equipment as Bruce appeared out of the back room where Tony knew there was a small lounge, kitchenette, and full bath. He had a towel around his waist and his hair was dripping wet.

“What? You tear up the place and then take a relaxing bath afterward?” Tony said as he watched Bruce take a second towel that he held and dry his hair.

“Something like that,” Bruce replied and sank down on one of the chairs tucked into the desk at the side of the laboratory. He looked spent, like whatever had happened took him by surprise and taking a bath had been his attempt to wash away the after effects.

“What happened?” Tony indicated the mess of the benches, the glass all over the floor, the dented centrifuge. He tiptoed across the glass but it still crunched under his shoes.

“Steve happened. I wasn’t quite ready for it. I will be next time.” Bruce’s shoulders slumped as he eased back in the chair. “I need tea.”

“Steve did this?” Tony screwed up his mouth. He knew Steve didn’t do this. Hell, Steve wouldn’t have been able to get here faster than Tony had.

“Yeah,” Bruce said but his voice sounded far off. His eyes watered but he managed not to start crying, and Tony was eternally grateful for that since he had no idea how to handle it.

It hit him what had really happened. “Oh.” Through the bond. They were communicating somehow. “How’s that work?”

“Not sure.” Bruce rolled his head back and forth on the back of the chair. “I was just standing there and suddenly I’m in the middle of a forest and Nazis are shooting at me. I can hear the ping ping of the bullets off my shield, and the stench of blood and oil burning my nostrils. All around me carnage. But I have to lead the survivors from the concentration camp I liberated to safety. They’re weak. So weak.” He put a hand over his face. “It was terrible. The smell.” He gagged a little and Tony swore he saw a little green shift over his chest and forearm.

“Jesus,” Tony muttered. Maybe it was a good thing that he wasn’t bonded to Steve. Who the hell wanted that as entertainment throughout the day? “Was it a nightmare or something?”

Bruce sat up and his eyes looked weary and puffy as if he’d been crying. “I don’t know.” He shrugged. “It could have been a flashback. All I know is that I was getting some kind of irritation through the bond. Nothing specific, mind you. Then it quieted. Eventually this happened.” Bruce gazed into the middle distance as he added, “For him it’s fresh you know. All those memories are like last week. To us it was generations ago, to him yesterday.”

Tony swallowed down the growing empathy. He was not going to feel sorry for Capsicle. The man had everything going for him. A soul pack – the leader of a soul pack. The rarity! It was so rare and so hidden in society that most of the time soul packs weren’t open to the rest of the world. No one really knew a lot about them. The stuff on Wikipedia was probably a bunch of hogwash. Now, Rogers had to deal with adjusting to modern life as well as figuring out how to be the leader of a soul pack. How the hell did that work? Obviously, not so well, since he transferred his feelings and memories to Bruce.

“And you Hulked out?” Tony concluded. “Sorry, pretty obvious.”

“Yeah, not sure what Steve got from me. But he almost immediately tried to stop his transfer of data.
or memories or whatnot.” Bruce put the heels of his hands into his eyes and pushed. “God, I should have stayed in India.”

“So you get memories from him. Does he get stuff from you?” Tony asked and rolled a stool over the glass to a clear space on the floor. He settled on it. “Like do you see him taking a shower?”


“Like?” Tony asked and waited but that’s when Bruce clammed up. “Oh I get it. It’s only for the pack.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, or not saying,” Bruce replied. He sat forward but hunched his shoulders, closing in on himself. “I don’t think I have a right to share something that was deeply personal for him. I don’t think that’s the way this should work.”

“But I thought we were science bros and now you’re mind melding with Grandpa Spangles. How is science ever going to understand soul packs if they’re so insular?” Tony shook his head. He needed to stop. He was never going to be a part of the pack, even as an outsider. “That’s just great. I thought you were on my side.”

“There are no sides. What sides?” Bruce rubbed his hand through his damp hair. He dropped it and looked at the water droplets. “We’re all singletons and now we’re merging into this ocean, this thing I don’t understand. I don’t get why it was me that was chosen first. I’m not on anyone’s side. I just want to find a way to calm Hulk enough or get rid of him. Either way, I have to live with it and now Steve – Steve who just woke up has to deal with this as well.”

“Well, don’t worry about it too much. He’s leaving for DC soon,” Tony said and he stood up. He didn’t need to sit here and listen to this crap. This “let’s all get along” shit. Although he knew that Bruce hadn’t said anything about that at all. What Bruce said only served to open up the idea of sympathy and maybe a little pity for the Grandpa Hero.

“He’s leaving for DC?” Bruce said and stood up. He avoided the glass shards on the floor like an expert. Tony figured he must have a lot of experience in the field of dealing with Hulk-related outcomes.

“Yeah, I’m not sure that will change your voodoo connection or not, but he’s leaving. Playing with the big spy organization now.” Tony tried to sound casual. Hoped to hell he sounded like he didn’t care. He shouldn’t care. This was the guy who caused Tony to grow up in a shadow of a memory. A little kid should never have to do that at all.

“He’s joining SHIELD? After we found out it was playing around with Hydra weapons?” Bruce said and his voice showed only despair and disapproval. “I thought better of him.”

“Maybe he thinks he can change things. From what I understand, Steve Rogers is the eternal optimist when it comes to people. Believes in them and all,” Tony replied and couldn’t fathom why he was bothering with trying to defend that shithead that couldn’t even pick Tony to be part of his stupid soul pack. Inwardly, Tony berated himself for still trying to build up Steve Rogers and his stupid Captain America persona.

“Maybe. Natasha and Clint could have had a hand it in too,” Bruce said. “It’s not like anyone else gave him anything to do other than deal with the complete displacement he must feel on his own.”

“You seem awfully sympathetic,” Tony said. It was true, everything that Bruce stated. No one really
gave Steve a hand. According to what Tony heard, Steve had a severe abdominal wound after the Chitauri attack and never sought treatment. It would explain the relative disinterest in the group eat-out they had after the attack.

“Well,” Bruce said as he shrugged. “I understand a little about being completely cut off from everything I know and love.”

“That’s big of you,” Tony said and he couldn’t keep the tiny bit of snark out of his response. Thankfully, Bruce ignored it or wasn’t aware enough of Tony’s character to identify when he wasn’t being sincere.

“I suppose since I’m the one linked to him now I kind of have been selected by the universe at large to do what I can,” Bruce said. He placed his hands at his hips, the towel tucked tightly around them. “I see it as a little bit of karma.”

Tony shifted some of the glass shards with his shoe toe. He really should call maintenance to come and clean up this mess and to haul the destroyed centrifuge away. “Karma?”

“Yeah, I mean I had the audacity to think that I could recreate the serum and become, you know, him. That I thought I was good enough to be what he was.” Bruce sighed. “Is. I suppose that’s is now.”

Tony put up his hands and jumped off the stool. “Wait, wait, wait. Don’t you do that. Don’t you think that he’s on some pedestal as well. Because he’s not. He’s a man with a lot of faults. A huge shit ton of faults.”

“I’m not saying he isn’t. We all are faulty beings, but he’s been placed in a situation no one else has in the world. I know he’s hurting,” Bruce said as he went back into the bathroom. He called from the tiled room – the words echoing as he spoke. “You know, he needs this team. We’re his only family. Maybe we should all just do the bond thing and see if it works.”

The idea of having to admit that Steve Rogers, the paragon of virtue and all that was good in the world, didn’t pick him terrified Tony. Or some universal magical force split them apart because Tony wasn’t good enough – well, that was not getting out if Tony could help it. “I don’t think that’s the way soul packs work.”

Bruce came out of the bathroom with an old dirty pair of jeans on as he was pulling on sweatshirt over his head. “Do you know how they work?” He freed his head and adjusted the sleeves (they were too long). “I never spent a lot of time worrying about them. I mean, when I started to hear about them as a reality, it was scientific curiosity but since I couldn’t partake I just ignored it.”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been doing some research,” Tony said, and that was bald faced lie. He never even cared. He thought hippies and punkers and weird ass religious types were part of the soul pack crowd. He never thought of it as mainstream. Scientists rarely got to study them. Governments hungered after them, but somehow – as far as Tony knew – soul packs avoided scrutiny.

“Yeah? So what did you learn so far?” Bruce said as he went to the closet and retrieved a broom and dustpan. He went through the motions as if cleaning up debris was second nature and Tony supposed it must be by now. “Anything I could use?”

“I’m not sure.” Lord, how was he going to fake this one. “What are you looking for?” All he knew he’d shown Steve and that was from the wonderful Wikipedia source.

“What the bond actually is? Will we communicate through it? Or just feel each other as team mates?
What is it?” Bruce maneuvered the broom under the lab bench and swept up the shattered glass.

Tony glanced around and then asked, “JARVIS, could you pull the data on soul packs? Answer Bruce’s question.”

“Data, sir?”

“Yes, from the internet. The data on soul packs. Bring it forth and regale us with your knowledge.”

JARVIS paused for an uncomfortable amount of time and Bruce opened his mouth as if to question it, but Tony put a finger to his lips. “JARVIS, anytime now.”

“Where would you like me to start, sir?” Tony swore he could hear a sarcastic tone to the AI’s voice. “At the beginning?”

“No, we know what soul packs are. Just tell us what science has been able to piece together.” It couldn’t be a shit ton because of the way soul packs kept to themselves. Like the Amish. If Amish were soulers or whatever the hell they were called.

Bruce stopped sweeping as JARVIS began.

“According to Doctor Stephen Strange, the existence of soul packs started sometime after his encounter with Dormammu, an ancient god like universal being. He used an infinity stone that caused temporal manipulations to create branches in time, causing time to loop. But the final bargain ended up with changes to the continuum in which the whole of the universe exists. This is published on the dark web, sir. It is not openly available, though some conspiracy sites do reference it.”

“So it really isn’t a jump to a different universe but a transformation of our universe?” Tony asked. It rankled him because he couldn’t recalled a time when soul packs did not exist. That meant that everyone, including Tony, been changed by an outside force.

“Exactly, sir. Soul packs are misnamed.”

“How’s that?” Bruce leaned against the lab bench and waited as JARVIS explained.

“The soul pack is the connection of astral projections through the dimensions. Each person has a soul or astral projection. The soul pack is that connection of souls or astral projections linking them together so that one cannot exist as a whole without the others.”

“Does that mean if one person dies the others will as well?” Tony asked because hell he didn’t want that.

“No, from my research it seems as if the living person will eventually heal.” JARVIS stopped, allowed the information to sink in and then added, “The astral projection is an intricate pattern. How the pattern grows and forms determines the strength and well-being of the soul pack.”

Tony considered what he knew. The erroneous information that he and Steve found this afternoon. “So how does a soul pack or astral projection connection form?”

“The synchronicity of astral energies through the various dimensions of the multi-verse. Captain Rogers and Doctor Banner were synchronized and thus bonded.”

“Isn’t that kind of weird? Why me and Steve?” Bruce said and he curled his lip as if he still didn’t believe his cursed luck.
“Both of you have been altered by a serum. Both of you have sought out ways to help humanity because of your alternations. The astral plane and your projections on it were similar enough for the energy waves to synchronize.”

“That sounds reasonable. I might have to spend some time learnin-.”

Tony interrupted Bruce to ask, “So what makes it not work?”

“Astral projections have energy waves. Energy waves like all waves can cancel each other out. They must synchronize perfectly to bond,” JARVIS said. “A bonding experience is rare, a soul pack rarer still. As it is, Captain Rogers might not find another person to be in his soul pack.”

“That’s unlikely, right? He has the ring on his wrist that designates him as a leader. He will eventually find a pack,” Bruce said.

“Most probably. But it may take many months or years.”

“That hurts,” Bruce whispered.

“With Captain Rogers, it will probably take years considering he does not have a family to bond with nor any close friends. His synchronicity is isolated and off. The likelihood of him actually having a pack with multiple members, as I mentioned, is small.”

“That seems universally f*cked up,” Tony said. While it still stung that his astral projection or whatever the hell it was didn’t connect up with Rogers’, the idea that the man would have this promised wrist band that came to nothing – well, that had to hurt a lot more than being left out of some stupid pack. “I wonder if Rogers knows this?” That was supposed to be non-verbal, but unfortunately when in the midst of thought Tony had a tendency to babble.

“I do not know, sir, but you can ask him yourself. He has requested permission to see Doctor Banner.”

“What? When?” Tony said and whipped the stool to the side as if he had been caught in some evil plan.

“Captain Rogers entered the Tower less than five minutes ago. As I said, he has requested permission to see Doctor Banner. I was about to rely his request.”

Tony turned to Bruce who only raised his hands in question. Shaking his head, Tony said, “Okay? Let him up.”

Might as well get this over with now. Tony scanned the place and, for a crazed moment, thought that they needed to clean up – right away. He didn’t want the Captain to see the laboratory in such a state. What would that mean to someone so orderly, so used to military codes? But then he remembered he hated Steve Rogers for what he did to his childhood.

When the elevator arrived, JARVIS announced Captain Rogers and then fell silent as Steve peered into the laboratory space and stepped off of the lift. His gaze traveled over the lab but hopped over to Bruce. A look of relief mixed with concern moved over his expression as he took in the state of the laboratory but also that Bruce seemed relatively calm. And himself.

“Doctor Banner,” Steve said and then seemed to notice Tony for the first time. “Oh, I- Stark, I didn’t realize you would be here.”

“In my building? You didn’t realize I would be in my own building,” Tony snapped. Because why
not? Every time he saw the Star Spangled Wonder he wanted to claw his own eyes out.

Dumbfounded was the only word to describe the Capsicle’s look. He furrowed that brow of his and then zeroed in on Tony. “Considering the number of floors, no, I didn’t expect you to be with Doctor Banner. I half expected you to be with your Miss Potts.”

“It’s Ms. And don’t call her mine; we don’t own women these days like you did in the days of yore.”

Steve stumbled over his reply but eventually ended up by saying, “I didn’t say that.”

“You implied.”

“I never did.”

“I would think you did, just the way you stated it.”

Bruce jumped in. “Okay, we got it. What can I do for you, Steve?”

Steve shifted his focus to Tony and then back to Bruce. Steve’s gaze simmered like an egg about to crack from being over boiled. Without much rationale to stay put, Tony did the only thing he could think of – he left but didn’t say goodbye or wish the good (bad) Captain well. In fact, he kind of wished Captain America would get frozen again and leave his company (and his building).

When he returned to his floor, the movers that Pepper must have called in the short intervening time were in full swing. While he would miss his hometown of New York, he found himself jittery with anticipation and he just wanted to leave. Seeing Pepper talking to the lead mover brought a rush of gratitude. She’d always been his anchor, his savior. He needed to remember that, he needed to zero in on that. Why worry about a thawed out has-been super hero when he had a dream girl like Pepper on his arm.

When she looked up at him from the tablet she reviewed with the mover, Tony’s heart soared. That look, that love, he never would have hoped for years ago when he drank his way through every new starlet, some race car drivers (they aren’t as macho as they pretend to be), and some hockey players as well as the occasional scientist. Tony needed to throw off the burdensome cloak of his past and move forward with her, a breath of fresh air.

Boarding his private jet later that night, Pepper nuzzled up to Tony. After a quiet dinner and wine, they ended up in the bedroom in the back of the jet. He fucked her with new enthusiasm as if he was a man who’d seen his death and it stalked him. To his needy lovemaking, she gave back exactly what he needed as she always did. When he thought he would go crazy with the need to finally finish but something deeply seeded inside of him prevented it – Pepper knew what to do. She whispered in his ear and then slipped a lubed finger up his ass and he exploded into her like a teenage boy fucking for the first time.

Later, lying with her in his arms, Tony stared into the darkness as the jet flew over the open prairie lands of the States. His mind whirled around how he couldn’t lose her, but how the darkness growing within him would eventually drive her away. Maybe it was that same darkness that split him off from the soul pack. Maybe he couldn’t bond because he had been touched by the death knell of something. He’d closed his eyes in space and expected to die. He never thought he would fall back to Earth. In that he supposed somehow he was the same as Rogers. Captain America closed his eyes when the water of the cold ocean rushed over him and he accepted his fate. He died. Tony accepted his – or maybe he never did. Maybe that was his fault.

“You’re thinking too much,” Pepper said in a lazy, tired voice.
“Go to sleep.”

“You, too, then. You’re keeping me awake with all that racket.” Pepper shifted away from his embrace, separating them. The cool air invaded the sheets and reminded him of the cold of space.

It was funny in a strange and humiliating kind of way because he never felt the ‘cold of space’. What he’d felt was a kind of warmth. What he’d seen as he closed his eyes had been lights. He supposed it had been from the bomb blowing up the Chitauri mother ship, but it could have been just flashes of nerve endings screaming their death notes. Yet now, now he thought he might have seen something else – some part of himself reaching out and searching for something, someone to cling to, to hold to, to bond to.

That couldn’t be it, of course. But Strange’s encounter with that Drummer guy had happened sometime before – Tony wasn’t sure of the dates or the times. He was actually fairly certain that Strange couldn’t pin it down either anymore. Fucking with time probably did that.

Maybe that someone he searched for during those last moments before he fell to Earth had been Pepper. Hadn’t JARVIS asked him if he wanted to call Pepper, to say goodbye? But even as he considered it, even as he closed his eyes as he saw the flashes of gold stretching out into the abyss, he knew it hadn’t been Pepper. It would never be Pepper, no matter how hard he tried and how hard he hoped. He hadn’t landed on where he was supposed to be. He fell to the Earth and cracked the foundation of himself. His soul, his energy, his astral projection, failed. There was something wrong with him. Even if it was possible, he would never be able to bond with Pepper.

Soul bonds are rare.

Soul packs are rarer still.

His astral projection, his sense of self, had been perturbed by his witnessing of the cosmos and the great nothingness he understood. Captain Tightpants could never accept him within the inner circle of the soul pack because Tony couldn’t fucking spill his load without his soon to be wife sticking him up the ass. He’d forgotten what it felt like to be free enough to engage and to release. It was like he needed someone to press the button for him to enjoy life. He opened his eyes and glanced at Pepper, asleep 30,000 feet in the sky like an angel. And what was he but a stalker, holding onto her because he’d broken his own soul, his soul’s fire darkened and flickered out.
Presently, the Future

Chapter Summary

Where Steve tries to learn a little more about the soul pack and the future. Oh and he bonds, again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Steve wanted to be truthful with himself (and he routinely went that path), the whole soul pack thing left a bad taste in his mouth. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Bruce; he happened to think that man had been given a pretty horrible fate which in some ways Steve internalized and blamed on himself. The idea that the serum could be properly repeated, the whole experiment from top to bottom, was predicated on the idea that the serum worked the same in all people. While Steve hated to admit the reason the serum worked the way it did in him happened to be because of who he tried to be, in the end after reading all the failed attempts, he had to agree with Erskine.

No one ever thought it would be a good idea to try it on someone who might need it as a way to escape health issues. Most of the government fell into the trap that Schmidt had – use it on strong men and make them even stronger. It just didn’t work that way. Bruce had used it as a cure, but the serum didn’t cure that way – at all. Steve couldn’t say he understood how it made him better, but he knew that there were certain parts of his mind and his brain that were untouched and he had hoped would be cured by the serum that weren’t. Instead, as he became Captain America he simply shoved those failings into a compartment in his brain, closed it, locked it, and threw away the key. Lingering on his weaknesses during a world war helped no one.

But now as he sat in front of Bruce and asked him what had happened Steve began to comprehend that his mind, his secrets, might no longer be his – somehow Bruce saw it or felt it. Reaching over to Steve, Bruce laid what he must have thought would be a comforting hand on Steve’s arm but in actuality felt like razors cutting into his reserve, his safe place in his head.

“I’m not going to tell anyone, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Steve frowned as he looked at Bruce’s hand. “I’m not thinking that at all. I’m just worried.” He peered over his shoulder at the considerable damage Bruce had done to the laboratory. He couldn’t even name some of the instruments, but he was sure the big one in the corner shouldn’t have a dent in the side. “You shouldn’t have to carry my burden along with your own.”

“Well, we might be able to figure something out,” Bruce said but his curiosity overwhelmed him. Steve could clearly see it written on his face. “What happened to you? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I get that you had a dream or a flashback, or something, but when I turned Hulk – what happened?”

“I, actually…” Steve stared down at his interlocking fingers, hands clasped together, closed to the world. “I was trying to get some sleep. Stark had left my apartment and riled me up a little. I’m not sleeping too well-.” He stopped. Bruce didn’t need to know everything. Unless, of course, he already did. “I tried to relax to get my head on straight. Anyway I started to drift off and the memory came back. I felt something through the bond and I knew I transferred the memory. I’m sorry- I’m so sorry.” Steve glanced over his shoulder again.
At that Bruce stood up from the chair he’d settled on when Stark left. “Come on in back. We can have some tea and talk.” He led Steve from the laboratory down a hallway that passed for a kitchenette and then to a sitting area that overlooked the cityscape. It was grand. That’s all Steve could think. He walked right up to the windows and gazed out. New York City had always meant so much to Steve. It meant home. It meant America. But now he knew that was a false illusion. The United States was something—an amalgamate of ideas and places. New York City only reflected a tiny portion. How could he, as Captain America, symbolize them all? Should he symbolize all of them? His heart ached for something simpler. At least the war had been simple in its way. Painted a kind of black and white. Sure there was the gray—internment camps, segregated troops. Yet, the overall focus on the good and the evil—that was simple, and in that he understood how to symbolize America.

Before Steve realized that Bruce had left, he’d come back with a steaming mug of tea and offered it to him. Steve thanked Bruce and accepted it. Bruce gestured to the comfy looking chairs placed in a U—all facing the brilliant city beyond the windows. Grateful, Steve settled into a chair and Bruce sat across from him. It was off putting how they were strangers yet bonded together. Awkward wasn’t exactly the word for it. Creepy felt like a better descriptor.

“So.” Bruce opened his hands. Steve noticed he didn’t have tea.

“So,” Steve began again. He played with the tea bag, watching it bob up and down in the mug. “So, I—I often dream of the war. Both then and now. It is, or was impossible to escape. Only been awake for a little while. But I dream of it—”

“That’s to be expected,” Bruce said. Steve knew he was trying to be comforting, but the way Bruce watched him, analyzed his movements, just felt like how a scientist might observe a subject—an animal or an insect under the dissecting microscope.

He pushed the idea out of his head and then said, “So you’ll get more of them, unless we can find a way for me not to transfer so much of the memories to you.”

“We will.” He sounded too confident to Steve. “Were you affected by me?”

“A little,” Steve confessed just that much. He wasn’t going to tell Bruce about the waves of unbridled anger and confusion. Of the inner workings of a mad mind, a beast searching for ways to communicate and to absolve itself of the sins of a man it had no control over. “I felt the anger and the confusion.”

“But you didn’t act on it?” Bruce asked, his face a concerned line.

“No, I didn’t need to,” Steve replied and he wanted to ask why he would have acted on it because the transfer of pain and confusion was more of a seeking than something that was an affliction. “I think the Hulk was confused but didn’t know how to communicate it.”

“Breaking the centrifuge was a great way to start.” Bruce gripped the arms of the chair. Steve swore his knuckles turned green instead of white. “I can deal with it. I can.”

“I’m sorry I put you in this position,” Steve said. “It wasn’t a choice I made—.”

“But one thrust upon you,” Bruce said and nodded. He calmed down again and Steve wondered at the unpredictability, how Bruce controlled it moment to moment. “I know a little about that. Don’t apologize. I should be complimented that you picked me.”

“I thought it was the universe that picked. I was kind of a vessel or something?”
“What?” Bruce squeezed up his face and sat away from Steve. “You need to do some studying on the subject-.”

“Yeah, like everything else,” Steve noted, but then he tried to soften his tone. “I will. Stark – Tony showed me some stuff on his phone. From a site on the internet called Wikipedia.”

“Lord, don’t use that as your main source of anything. That’s curated by a bunch of volunteers that can essentially write whatever they damned well please. And considering entries are changed by whatever political wind is blowing, I think that there are better places to look,” Bruce said.

Steve weighed the information. He’d thought that the Wikipedia had been some kind of official encyclopedia. He was used to volumes and volumes of a big stately books with gold leaf and leather bindings. Wikipedia sounded weird, but it was a convenient source. Tony had directed him to that site and now Steve considered whether Tony had known that it was an error prone source? Probably, since he used it as a way to throw Steve farther down the primrose path. Predictable. In every way.

“Great,” Steve muttered.

“Well, all is not lost,” Bruce said. “It’s not like you’re that far into it.” Bruce walked back into the laboratory, leaving Steve in the lounge. Steve frowned and wondered if he should follow but Bruce just said, “Hold on a minute.”

Steve sipped the tea and tried to pretend it didn’t feel like waiting in the examination room in the draft building at the world’s fair. Those minutes ticked by as if warped by molasses in January. He waited and hated the tea but drank it anyhow because his mother taught him manners. Eventually Bruce came back with a handful of papers.

“Printed out some of the best stuff that JARVIS found,” Bruce said and handed the thick wad to Steve. “You can read over it and then we could talk about it.”

“Yeah,” Steve said and accepted the offering. “Thank you, Doctor Banner.”

“Call me Bruce. If we’re going to be bonded I think that would be best, don’t you?” He crossed his arms and tucked his hands under them.

“Okay, Bruce.” Steve stood up. “I think I should go. You’re all right and I have to finish packing.” Part of that was a lie. He didn’t have any other packing to do. Being awake less than a month meant he didn’t have a lot of possessions.

“Yeah, Tony told me that you were taking a job with SHIELD, going to DC.” When Bruce met his gaze, Steve recognized the same disdain that he’d seen in Tony’s expression.

“Yes, I’m going to DC, but I see you’re not in the approving column.” Steve wasn’t looking for approval but he didn’t know a lot of people and he hated the idea of pushing everyone away. Especially someone who would be linked to him in some mythical way for the rest of his life.

“You saw what I saw, Steve. SHIELD was – is building Hydra-type weapons. I don’t think you approved of those, did you?” Bruce watched him and, for a moment, he thought the scientist weighed whether or not to trust him.

“No, no I did not.” Steve nodded. “But I also need to find my way in this new world. SHIELD might not be the way, but I want to serve my country. The Army isn’t the way to go for me. Not anymore.”

“But a spy organization is?”
“Both Natasha and Clint are part of SHIELD. So was Coulson. I trusted Coulson. He didn’t have some underhanded agenda. He wanted to do the right thing. So does Clint, and maybe so does Natasha.” Now it was Steve’s turn to judge. “An organization is only as good as its people. And I put my trust and faith in people.”

Bruce waited a moment before he answered, “Okay. I’ll accept that, but remember, organizations have a group think mentality. You know that, you know how easily people can be manipulated to think a certain way, act a certain way, all for the good of what the organization defines as right.”

“Doctor Banner, Bruce,” Steve said and smiled. “It seems you don’t know quite enough about me. I’m the last person who follows orders without question.”

“Are you sure?” Bruce said. “You said we have our orders and we should follow them.”

“I did. And that was because at the moment, I believed in those orders. If I have questions about an order, any order, I will not follow them. You don’t have to worry about that. You can trust that.” There was little to no respect for him in this century and it was something that Steve had to get used to. The hollow ache emptied his chest.

“Okay, I’ll try. But you need to keep your defenses up,” Bruce added. “SHIELD would love to get their hands on controlling your soul pack.”

“I understand that, believe me. Fury might not be the most straightforward fella out there, but I trust him when he says he’ll ensure that it isn’t exploited.”

“It has to be more of a promise,” Bruce said. “I can’t have anyone controlling the Hulk.”

“If you can’t trust Fury, trust me.” It was never more apparent than at that moment, that Steve Rogers was a stranger to this world. The Howling Commandoes were his team, his partners, his equals, but they also trusted Steve’s word, his intuition, his decisions. With this new life he started from square one and most of the time he didn’t even know where square one was. “You don’t have to worry. Just because I come from the early 20th century, and I seem like the ultimate optimist, I grew up during the Great Depression and cut my teeth during the worst war in history, I do have a tendency to be less than a follower. I will keep you protected. You won’t be forced to be part of SHIELD. You’ll have your freedom, I promise you that.” With that Steve knew it was time to leave. The urge to get out of the Tower, out of the laboratory and back home to that quiet little apartment in Brooklyn overcame him like a compulsion. He rubbed his hands on his pants. “I think it might be time for me to leave. I want to thank you, Bruce, for being patient and realizing this is all new to me.”

“Well soul packs are kind of new thing for all of us according to Strange. It’s weird thinking about how our lives changed because he played with time. How soul bonds and packs are a thing we all accept as real now, but only a few years ago they never existed and we didn’t know about them.” Bruce led him down the hallway to the laboratory. Steve glanced around with a wash of guilt at the mess. Bruce seemed to read his mind. “Don’t worry about it. I think I’m going to start meditating again. It’ll help both of us. Calm our link.”

“Whatver the link is,” Steve agreed. “Do you have an idea?”

“Oh!” Bruce put up a finger and hurried back to the lounge, only to bring back the bundle of papers with the print out on soul packs. “Here you go.”

“Sorry, I almost forget them,” Steve said and wondered why he wouldn’t have remembered. Part of his brain only wanted to hide his head in the sand and forget about what he needed to learn about the future. “Just another thing to learn.”
“It’s not that bad, Steve,” His face said the opposite; that part of him was horrified at what Steve would have to endure.

“Well, I guess I could just jump on the bike SHIELD gave me and wander around the country for a while.” Absently, he flipped through the printed pages.

Bruce brightened.

Steve should have just allowed Bruce to believe he would do exactly that – roam the country and get back to his roots. But the truth was that he had no roots, not in this new century. He felt at loose ends and the only thing that felt right was serving. When Natasha mentioned it, Steve jumped at the chance. He could have gone back to the military, to the Army, but that would really mean starting over again. He knew no one in the Army. At least at SHIELD, he started with a few of the basics. Natasha, Fury, Clint.

Even as he thought about it, Bruce’s smile faded. “You’re not even considering it.”

“Did you read my mind?”

Bruce shook his head. “Just feelings.” He pressed his lips into a tight line and then said, “You know you aren’t alone.”

“Yeah,” Steve said and looked down at the papers. “People keep telling me that.” He glanced back up at Bruce. “Thank you, Bruce. I’ll keep in touch.”

“You do that. I don’t think you can just ignore me now.”

“Probably not.” Steve offered his hand to Bruce who took it without reserve. They shook hands and then Steve left. The visit managed to alleviate a little of the tension in his shoulders but not all of it. Bruce made a ton of sense. Going with SHIELD was against a lot of what Steve stood for, especially since it was a spy organization. But he felt he could do good under the umbrella of SHIELD, more so than he could through the military.

Right now, he didn’t trust himself in this century. The world shifted around him. He stood still, frozen in ice, and the world burst into a different thing. The transformation felt familiar and foreign at the same time. Farring and horrifying all at once. Even his apartment in Brooklyn screamed this century though whoever at SHIELD had been in charge of setting it up and decorating – Steve suspected Coulson – worked hard to make it feel comfortable and homey but still sterile and absent of his life. It did, but Steve could never deny he wasn’t home. He wasn’t in his century. No amount of contrived, colorless, dull walls and decorations could convince him.

At home he brewed himself some coffee and settled into his living room, which he would have called a parlor in his day, with the bundle of papers on his lap. He needed to learn what to expect with this soul pack. He put the mug on the table and fished through the papers, organizing them into different topics.

As a child, sure, he’d heard of them, but now he knew that was some kind of different memory. A fake one that had been implanted in his head since Strange’s encounter with the celestial being. He feared all of his memories might be fake. But the ones of his mother couldn’t be, could they? As a sick little boy, she leaned over his bed and brushed his hair back, sang him songs from the old country, and told him tales of soul packs in ancient days. Were all of those memories false? What was a soul pack? What did it mean for him as an individual?

Was it like a mind link? Could he call out to Bruce? He knew the bond transferred information
subconsciously and that might not always be for the best. He needed to learn how to control that so he concentrated on the stash of papers that referenced transference of mind images and communication. From what he could gather, Bruce’s announcement of using *meditation* might be the right track. Steve knew nothing about meditation, but the documents referred to other altering and calming activities as well. It included more physical activities. Running, jogging, swimming. All of these he could do. He would need to get this under control sooner rather than later because SHIELD would not allow him on missions if he was a liability. Plus he needed to ensure that SHIELD would not intrude on Bruce’s life. That was not going to happen.

His first order of business would be to see if he could stop the ‘transference of mind’ as the documents called it. He spent hours on calming his mind through physical activities. Jogging and running helped him and lifted his messy thoughts to a serenity. The problem became trying to focus on that feeling when he wasn’t running. He needed to be able to tap into it at any time to slow the transference. Throughout the last of his days in New York and when he moved to DC, Steve spent the majority of his time attempting to stop the transference. He found out that SHIELD knew quite a bit about it. It happened to be the prime issue that SHIELD doctors focused on when clearing him for duty once he moved to DC. He went through a battery of tests that harkened back his days right after Project Rebirth. It was Fury who ended up putting a stop to it when the Director found out that the doctors were also subjecting him to physical damage.

When Fury marched into the laboratory with Natasha on his heels, the scientists cowered but Steve only perked up and smiled. Granted it, he admitted it wasn’t a full smile, maybe just a grin. Or a half a grin.

“You like what they’re doing to you?” Fury asked as his black leather coat wrapped around him. Steve saw it as a cloak – that stilled like the blackest deep ponds.

“No, but I know it’s necessary.”

“Necessary enough to have Bruce calling us up and asking what the hell is going on?” Natasha chimed in.

“I’ve been trying to block it,” Steve retorted and the doctors nodded like they all had puppet strings on their heads. Steve continued, “It had to have worked. He didn’t hulk out, did he?”

“No, not that we know of,” Natasha said and side eyed Fury. He only grumbled at her.

“Get dressed. We have to talk,” Fury ordered and then sneered at the doctors. “No more experiments.”

The doctors – all wide eyed and huddling together – nodded and scurried away from Steve, not looking at him as they escaped. He watched them go as Fury stalked off and Natasha helped Steve out of his bindings. She kept her eyes focused on unclipping the bindings and then stepped away as he stood up from the chair.

“They weren’t hurting me,” Steve muttered and went to the side table and picked up his track pants. He slipped them on and then pulled on a t-shirt. He had a large burn across his chest. It hurt like hell, but he only cringed as the shirt’s fabric touched it. He’d turned around to dress since he still wasn’t comfortable with sharing changing rooms with women, but that’s how they did it at SHIELD these days.

“That’s not what Bruce said.”
“Did he hulk out?” Steve asked again as he crossed his arms and leaned back against the table, staring at her. He kept his gaze level, his tone professional.

“No,” Natasha said, but her stare was icy cold. Either she didn’t like that he submitted to the tests or she hated the idea that it hurt him – or Bruce. Whichever, it ended up with both Natasha and Fury pissed at him. “You shouldn’t let people hurt you to prove a point. Believe me, that never ends well.” She rolled her eyes and headed toward the door.

Stopping her by catching her arm, Steve said, “How else am I going to convince Fury that I’m not a liability?”

Natasha considered him. Her stare could be colder than the ice that froze him for 70 years. “There are methods to control the transference. I suppose these doctors didn’t tell you. First and foremost, you have to learn that SHIELD is an organization out to get information. Whatever information it is. They get it. However they can. These doctors lied to you.”

The fact that he was lied to hurt, made him angry. Yet he focused on her. “Are you angry with me or with the doctors?”

With a halfcocked smile, Natasha said, “Both. Plus I’m worried. Bruce is not the kind of person that you need SHIELD playing around with. So keep that in mind.”

“I’ll remember that. Thank you – well thank you for looking after me.” His hand slipped down her arm and touched the inner portion of her wrist. For a long moment, his fingers lingered on her pulse point, feeling the thread of her life. It punched into him like a dagger, hot and sharp. His vision whitened out and everything went dead around him except for the thrum of her heartbeat. It beat, deafening and all encompassing, in his head. She cringed and cried out as he spoke, “Confidant.”

He reached out and caught her before she collapsed to the floor. The pain streaked up Steve’s arm, the one grasped around Natasha. He didn’t even have to look to know what had happened– the brand marked him and would scar her as well. As the searing pain subsided, Steve gritted his teeth and said, “I’m sorry.”

Natasha rolled out of his grasp and pulled up her cuff to get a better look at the tattoo on her flesh. It matched Steve’s new brand. He honored her by looking at it, though he hated the thought of causing another person to be locked into his net, his soul pack. The marking almost looked Cyrillic in design but it wasn’t a word or letter. Natasha fingered the mark and then looked up at him.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said again. He didn’t know what else to say. He felt cursed by the universe. It was ironic. Considering his physique, Steve had transformed into a kind of Quasimodo. Who would want him with such a deformity?

Natasha surprised him though. She shuffled a bit and then smiled. “No reason to be.”

“Are you sure?” The sting still ached in his wrist where the band was and now there was the new brand with its intricate weaving up his forearm.

Natasha stretched her hand to him and he grasped it. They stood up, together.

“Well, now I have an even strong reason to keep an eye on you. And I can make sure that SHIELD assigns me to watch over Bruce. One way or the other SHIELD will keep its hands off of the pack.”

“For someone who says SHIELD saved you, you seem oddly suspicious of its intentions.”

She lifted a shoulder. “It’s how I grew up.” She seemed oddly comfortable about the turn of events.
Considering her position, a link to someone so out of touch with today should be, at the very least, an inconvenience. She dusted herself off as he stood there feeling as if his arms were too big and his chest too large. Emanating from her, he only received a soft hum. Usually, he received a hard feedback loop that always gave him a headache, but not from her at all. The sound of her in his head warmed him. It felt both soothing and frightening – how very in control of her emotions she was.

After a second, Natasha noticed him and placed a hand on his arm. “Buckle up, big boy. This is where the fun begins.”

“I’m not sure I like that,” Steve said but as she strode out of the laboratory, he followed her. He had to jog a bit to catch up because she was on a mission. “This doesn’t upset you? At all?”

She continued weaving her way through the hallways of the Triskelion and raised an eyebrow as she cast a glance at him. “Like I said, this just made my job much easier.”

“Your job?” He was almost too afraid to ask.

After a quick knock on the door, Natasha walked straight into Fury’s office without awaiting an invitation. Fury sat at his desk in that infernal black leather coat, eye patch gleaming in the afternoon sun. “Did you speak to him?”

“Better.” Her features reminded Steve of a fox asked to guard the hen house. Why did he feel like he was about to be devoured? She pulled up her sleeve and showed her wrist to Fury. “We bonded.”

“Well, isn’t that nice.” Not even an itch of surprise. Fury cocked the brow over his eye patch and templed his fingers. “Tell no one else.”

“Why is this not a surprise to anyone?” Steve blurted out. Being subtle was never one of his fortes. Case in point – how many times did he get beaten up because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut?

“She’s an Avenger. I’m not surprised that you would bond with your team, your soul pack.” Fury sat up straighter in the chair, leaning his elbows on the desk. “This is your first step, Captain. The world around you changed, but this, this will guide you.”

Steve swallowed down the truth about Tony – that they didn’t bond. That one of the strongest members of the Avenger team who’d had been excluded. He might have said that he’d seen and knew about Tony – that he wouldn’t lie down on the wire, but Tony had proven him wrong. What had Steve done? Tony spat out that everything special about him came out of a bottle. Maybe, just maybe that was true. Too many nights during his time in war, he sat by the camp fire and the same horrible thoughts came to mind. It had been Dum Dum, not Bucky, not Gabe, no one else who’d come to him and cheered him up. Dum Dum pretended not to notice Steve’s melancholy about his inadequacies, inadequacies that no one recognized because they were concealed in a bright and muscular package. He failed when he didn’t bond with Tony, and that was on his shoulders – no one else’s.

“And we do have a method to handle this, you know,” Fury said as he stood up. “Natasha – well, now she’s officially your partner. I do not want this spread all over SHIELD. Keep your arm covered Agent.”

Natasha nodded and stood at ease. Somedays Steve felt like an observer of his own life and everyone else had more interesting parts, at least when it came to Natasha and Fury who seemed to hatch a plan without speaking to one another.

With no other strategy to find a way into having a role in this play, Steve latched onto the one thing
that had bugged him since he moved to DC. “What about Clint?”

“Barton is out of the picture for a while. He needs to debrief and to reset his life and mind.” Fury slashed his hand to keep Steve from asking anything more about Clint. “He needs time to reset. Don’t worry about him.”

Natasha was looking down at the desk, avoiding Steve’s gaze. She hated him already. The future hated him. “But Barton might-,” he started.

“No deal, Cap. It’s Natasha. And she knows a great deal about this soul pack stuff. It’s part of her job to know. I didn’t want to tell you this, but part of Natasha’s assignment includes keeping you and your pack safe. Not only from the outside, but from the inside.” Fury passed right over what exactly that meant; pursuit of the subject obviously off limits by his demeanor. “Plus, lucky for you, she brought in one of the world’s experts in soul packs.”

He looked between them, trying to read the inscrutable. Shaking his head, Steve said, “Okay, who is this person?”

Fury must have gestured or waved or telepathically done something, because the doors swept open wide and Doctor Strange waltzed in. He really was the last guy that Steve wanted to guide him on this hilariously ridiculousness of soul packs and bonding. He threw a look of disgust at Fury over his shoulder.

“You really aren’t the best soldier, are you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Steve retorted and Natasha chortled.

Behind Doctor Strange an Asian fellow walked in and considered the office, the occupants, and the situation. From his expression he was unimpressed. That in and of itself ingratiated him to Steve. Strange’s companion crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at Steve. “Is this him?”

“He would be the Lead in need of training,” Doctor Strange answered while Fury rounded his desk. Strange ignored Fury and instead focused on Steve. “Captain Rogers, you will be pleased to know that we will be lending out Wong’s services in order to train you in the ways of the -.”

“Force,” Natasha snickered, but no one smiled and Steve didn’t get the joke. Being out of the ice less than a month caught him in a trap of looking naïve or stupid or both most of the time.

Strange practically growled at her. “In the ways of astral projection and the soul pack, of course.”

“I’m going to learn astral projection?” Steve asked. He’d spent a lot of his free time reading up on soul packs and astral projections and dimensional transference. If Steve was honest with himself, the idea of learning about astral projections outside of the soul pack really didn’t appeal to him at all.

“No,” Strange stated and left it at that.

Thankfully, Wong picked it up and explained, “You will be learning how to control the bonds of the soul pack and how it connects your astral projection to others. We will not be training you in the ancient arts.”

Steve kept his face as still as possible but for some reason his mind skipped to Stark – how he would throw out a few sarcastic remarks to the two supposed wizards or sorcerers or whatever they pretended to be. There were times that Tony reminded him a little too much of his younger self – which didn’t make much sense because Tony was older than him in age but not in years lived.
“Well, that’s good because neither one of us are really interested in mystical demons. We have enough on our hands with the aliens and spy stuff,” Natasha said, mimicking Wong’s pose.

Fury cut in before Strange could ask, “It seems that Captain Rogers added another person to his pack today. Agent Romanoff will be taking the training as well.” His one eye stayed fixed on them, the glower speaking volumes. “We will be focusing on Rogers and Romanoff right now. We have another member of the pack in New York-.”

“We can speak with that member as well-.” Strange said but stopped when Fury sliced the air with his hand. “When you think it is appropriate.”

Steve glanced at Natasha who had turned away from him. Bruce presented a danger and Steve knew it. The idea that Bruce might be under the control of SHIELD always lurked in the back of his mind. He understood that Fury might be trying to protect Bruce’s position. SHIELD already knew about Bruce – about his affliction and his membership in the soul pack. It occurred to Steve then that Fury stood between the exploitation of the Hulk by SHIELD and Bruce’s freedom. Times like these gave Steve hope for this century.

Strange cleared his throat and considered Wong. Neither of them spoke and Steve wondered if they were communicating through some type of magic – if that’s what they called it these days. Back in the old days, Steve called it being a snake oil salesman.

“Well then, I think Wong will train both of you. I assume this means we will have greater exchange of information?” Strange gripped his hands together, but Steve noted a slight tremor as if they were not as strong as they should be.

When Fury finally gave a curt nod, Strange offered a bow with a flourish and then excused himself, leaving Wong without a farewell.

“You two good friends?” Steve asked and Wong only sneered. “Okay then.”

“On to the lessons?” Natasha said.

Fury ushered them out of his office and they ended up in what Steve could have called his office if it hadn’t been for the fact it was vacant, offered only folding chairs, and there was no name plate on the door. Still, Steve stowed his bag here when he was at the Triskelion.

“Let us sit,” Wong said as they all entered the room. Both Natasha and Steve pulled a folding chair from the stack in the corner of the room, but Wong settled cross legged on the floor. Steve stopped mid-chair set up and silently questioned Natasha. She lifted a shoulder and then put the chair back on the stack. Without hesitation, she sat across from Wong. Steve looked at the chair in his grasp and then at Wong. He really had no choice, but he hated giving over all of his fate to anyone. The only person he’d ever really done that with was Doctor Erskine.

Placing the chair back in the stack, Steve went to the semi-circle and sat down. Cross legged was something that he couldn’t achieve but he did his best. He wondered if they were going to meditate. He’d spent some time reading up on meditation techniques so he would understand what Bruce was doing to quiet the Hulk. As far as he knew from Bruce, it worked wonders.

“There is the other?” Wong asked after a long few minutes of silence.

Steve glanced at Natasha and confirmed. “Yes, our other member is in New York.”

“It is not the best choice to remain separate as pack members. But since you are still forming, it may not be avoided at this time. Does your other pack member know how to control the bond?” The
intelligence and wisdom in his eyes eased some of Steve’s trepidation.

“Yes? He meditates and it’s helped.” Tremendously, Steve wanted to add but doesn’t. Even when Steve had nightmares of the war, Bruce quelled the Hulk easily enough.

“That is a good method. What is even better is the method of the Soul Mantra. Do you know of it?” Wong exuded an inner calm but at the same time reminded Steve of some of the sternest Sisters who taught him long ago. “A mantra comes from the Buddhist or Hindu tradition, where a word, phrase, or sound is repeated to aid in meditation. In this case we don’t truly use it for meditation but to concentrate our soul or astral projection within our core. Remember the bonding is essentially an interweaving of astral projections that leaves you open to others.”

Natasha looked comfortable, interested, but through their bond he perceived a distrust. Yet, the distrust didn’t seem directed at Wong or what he was saying. Instead, Natasha lived in a state of distrust, in pessimism, in isolation. Some small part of him understood why his soul resonated with hers. Even though Steve found his faith in people, his life now consisted of isolation with a touch of distrust. In some profound way he thought his soul reached out for solace from hers and found some part of a kindred spirit.

“We will go through the basic Soul Mantras. From there you will begin to comprehend the astral bondings.” Wong closed his eyes and Steve side eyed Natasha. Were they supposed to follow suit? He had no idea. She nodded to him. With his eyes shut, Steve listened to Wong continue his lessons. “Lessons are simple. Learning is long. It is in the practice that you learn, not the teachings. Now the Soul Mantra you will practice is: The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul. Repeat it.”

Hesitantly at first, Steve started, “The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.” He heard Natasha’s low tones join his voice.

“Now repeat it as you concentrate on the bonds between.”

Steve followed the instruction. At first it seemed like he was in first grade again, singing out the alphabet. But Wong’s words flowed and he stressed concentrating on the meaning of the words and not just the rote sounds. Falling into the words, their meaning, came hard, but Steve used to pray the Hail Mary. He used to whisper the words late at night and knew how to drift into the meaning of a prayer. As he murmured the mantra, he started to understand it. The core, the soul of who he was became more, deepened with the bonding. If he bonded through a soul pack, he grew to be more than himself. As he came to this tenuous conclusion, the vibrations from Natasha’s astral projection and even Bruce’s, distant but clear, resonated. He followed the waves and curves of the vibration, the rhythm as he spoke the mantra. Naturally, he felt himself stretch further to encompass the lengths of the cords that strung them together. Even so, as he did he recognized something far off – some part of himself loose and shivering. He spoke the mantra clearly now as he searched for the meaning of his shredded part, this broken part. He suspected it had to do with his displacement. Even as he concluded it, he knew it wasn’t that at all. His soul’s waves rang discordant.

Part of him was hollowed out, empty and silent. It yearned for more, for connection, for fulfillment. A tendril reached out, seeking and longing, and he couldn’t follow it, couldn’t see the end. Yet even as he investigated this inner corner of his own soul, he saw himself denying it, reconstructing it so that he could pretend it didn’t want something different, something unheard of, something wrong. He closed it down and when he did that part shriveled and curled up as if desiccated and dying. There was no rhythm, no song, no part of a pack. Part of his soul slowly succumbed to a kind of death.

He retracted as fast as he could, closing it off, shutting down, building walls around it. He didn’t think Natasha or Bruce saw it. But as he opened his eyes, Wong studied him, his mouth in a tight pucker, his eyes studious and dark.
Steve glanced at Natasha, who still whispered the mantra in a sing song loving fashion, and then he focused on Wong.

“You cannot fear self.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Steve lied.

“Yes, you do.” Wong stood. The rustling of his robe alerted Natasha of his movement and she stopped, quieted. Wong considered her and then went back to Steve. “If you do not find the resonance to bond that part of your astral projection, it will surely unravel.”

He started away, but Steve hurried to his feet and asked, “What? What does that mean?”

“You will know one way or the other.” Wong left the empty office.

Steve stood there with his hands on his hips. “Well, that was extremely unhelpful.”

Natasha slapped his back. “Welcome to the future.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to tell you the slow burn doesn’t mean the you will do without romance. It will be there, just not the way you thought. Also - next chapter - Tony discovers something about himself that leaves him more isolated than before!
Self Defined Mess

Chapter Summary

Through the events of the Mandarin and after, Tony finds himself at a loss for who he really is.

Chapter Notes

Steve is not the only one in denial

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Waking up sweaty and horny as hell gave Tony flashbacks to his youth. Most of the time as a rambunctious teenager he woke up with visions of his latest crush in his head and a hard-on – he'd do the nasty with his favorite hand and get it over with, going back to sleep in as little as three minutes. It was quick and dirty back in the day. The new hot dreams faded and restlessness greeted him as it always did. He tried to pin it to the whole hell of New York and the void, but he knew it wasn’t that. Being on the brink of needing an orgasm and then suddenly being filled with a sense of loneliness and dread never happened to him as a kid but now seemed to be the current state of affairs. Plus the off kilter feeling emanated not from his brain but somewhere else – and that made no sense whatsoever. His whole being felt frayed and loose.

He sat up in bed, trying not to disturb Pepper as she slumbered beside him. Slipping from under the duvet, Tony padded across the floor of their bedroom and found his way to the main bar in the living room of his Malibu mansion. After the Battle of New York, Tony couldn’t stay in the Tower. He spent hours with Pepper planning the remodel, but finally succumbed to his need to be back in his home. Being home in California for a while provided him with sanctuary, but something still tugged him, inside. He pretended (even to himself) that it had nothing to do with not being chosen for the pack. He wanted to feel the warmth of the Pacific breezes again. Somewhere he could hide away and pretend the whole thing (New York or the soul pack) never happened. Yet, he shuddered awake with either dreams of a void, an abyss of nothing, or a need, a hunger so rich and deep that he barely managed to breathe. It felt like part of him had been halved.

Never in his life had he experienced that hollowed out ache. Was it the chasm of space that forced this emptiness to the fore? As a child he experienced loneliness, a kind of social isolation because of his brilliance and his wealth. He used it to his advantage. This ache, this yearning seeded differently inside of him. It gave him a want, as if his body and mind existed in a state of deprivation. It reminded him of being abducted and afraid in Afghanistan all those years ago. As if freedom from it was only a moment away, but it was fleeting and horrible to hope for. He needed a drink. He needed to clear his head of the maudlin mood and get back to himself again.

Tony poured himself two fingers of Scotch and went to the balcony to watch the black of the ocean, listen to the waves, and look on the horizon for the lights of the shipping lanes. He ached with need, with desire. It scared him that his yearning centered around something insubstantial, not Pepper. Ever since that moment with Rogers in his apartment, something felt off, odd, wrong. The funny thing
was – it wasn’t a physicality that he wanted or needed. He sat there as the crash of waves whispered to him and he closed his eyes, trying to find some balance. Something deep in him reached out, as if he stretched out his own hand and touched, caressed, made contact with something beyond.

The ends of his consciousness tattered in an attempt to connect, to interweave with something just out of his range. He wondered at it, because it felt suspiciously like the moment when he’d tried to bond with Steve. While the memory of that moment had been like ash in his mouth, something underneath the cold memories beat with life. He failed to put a finger on it or identify it, but even as he let his mind drift now, he sensed that distant hum, a thrum really. It called to him, lost, confused, and alone. How much it mirrored his own sense of self terrified him. Maybe he was just interjecting his own feelings. After all, he was essentially just meditating. When had he gotten so deprived that he would meditate? Tony Stark was anything but deprived.

Even as he played with these thoughts?, feelings?, impressions? Tony tried to fathom what he wanted from Steve. Sure a soul bond as part of the Avengers team would have been nice, but did he want it for the prestige? It couldn’t be - because Steve and SHIELD didn’t advertise it at all. So what role did he hope to have defined by Steve? Sentinel? Warrior? Friend? Lover?

Tony laughed to himself and his eyes snapped open to see the dark waters faded into the starry night. Why would Steve name him as friend or even lover? He barely knew the man. Tony fooled himself a million times over the years. He wasn’t going to allow a childhood dream influence him now. He needed to withdraw from longing to be a part of some weird soul pack or even from being part of the Avengers. He was on his own these many months. He had been Iron Man protecting the world before and he would be it again.

And so over the long days and through the summer to the winter, Tony promised himself not to look back, not to let the longing emptying out his core drag him down. Promises ended up only being broken wishes. How could the vacuous place inside him have weight? Like the gravity well of a black hole, it pulled him down and only the events of his life happening around him seemed to have any glimmer of light. He watched as if he was an outside observer as the ragged edges continued to unravel and sink into the depression of the hole inside of him. He pretended it didn’t matter. As he built and worked and discovered and invented, Tony Stark fooled himself that it didn’t matter that the events in New York became strangely distant and those people that were, for a moment, the most important in his life were only a dream or a figment of a yesteryear life. He faked that his trembling hands had nothing to do with the fears growing through him. Instead it was because of his drinking or not drinking – whichever it happened to be at that moment. He closed himself away from it all.

As if to challenge his desire to stay apart from the nascent team called the Avengers, Tony ended up facing the Mandarin on his own a little over a year after the whole Battle of New York fiasco. He would have thought that protecting the world from a madman would clarify in his brain what he wanted out of being Iron Man. By all rights, the very act of being a loner and finding a way to save the world again should have validated his feelings. Instead it ate a hole in his core. In the end he threw everything away simply to try and run from the fear, the darkness growing and aching within him.

Blowing up his mansion in Malibu hadn’t been on the list of priorities during the holidays (even if he didn’t technically launch the rockets at his residence, he’d been stupid enough to antagonize a terrorist). When it came to his suits? All of his armors created lovingly but in a fit of post-traumatic stress, those he blew up voluntarily because it was supposed to symbolize his love for Pepper and the next step on his recovery. It worked – to a degree. For a few blissful months he found a certain peace with leaving Iron Man behind him, leaving the mission of the world’s protection behind him. It helped to dissuade him from pressing too deep, from worrying about what might lie within. It helped to think about himself, but then images of his past haunted him – the past where he profited from war
and death. He tried to live a different life now, removing the armor and the glamour and become a more sedate mature version of himself. The media hounded him when he moved back to New York, looking for home. SHIELD called on him. More than once he had JARVIS turn their agents away. Tony wasn’t bound to them in any way even when Natasha appeared at his Tower in New York. His big ugly Tower with its empty Avenger floors that he needed to renovate again and make all of those memories and hopes disappear into the distant past.

Natasha demanded entrance and he almost said no, but it was Pepper who smiled at him on that spring morning in late March telling him that he couldn’t avoid the consequences of his past. It ruffled him a bit to hear her put it like that – she didn’t like Iron Man, she didn’t like the danger it put him in and he could understand it, but still Iron Man felt like an integral part of who he would always be. It wasn’t something to be ashamed of.

When Natasha arrived, the course of his life shifted as if a hurricane battered him and the roof had been torn off the shelter he’d been hiding in for months. Of course, he didn’t let her know how she affected him, how any of it affected him. She walked into the penthouse apartment like she owned the place. Her hair had been straightened and she wore civilian clothes. Black t-shirt with a gray blazer over it, and gray toned jeans with high glossy leather boots. Even dressed like an urbanite, there was no denying who or what she was.

“Stark,” Natasha said and walked straight to the lounge pit where Pepper already sat. They greeted one another with a hug and a kiss.

Tony stayed at the bar across from the lounge. “Drink?” Tony asked as he held up the tumbler of Scotch.

“No,” Natasha replied. Her hands were folded in front of her and the ‘no’ came out with a long o and a look of arrogant regard.

“On duty then? Not dressed for it.” He walked around the bar and headed toward the conversation pit. Raising his glass he said, “The joys of being retired.”

“Oh, are you?” She had always been the hardest nut to crack. She wasn’t showing any fault lines now. “Is that why you called out the Mandarin all on your own and ended up with a pile of rubble in the Pacific Ocean?” She hadn’t taken a seat.

Pepper stood up next to her and said, “We don’t like to discuss-.”

Tony chimed in before Pepper could finish. “I did what I had to do. What apparently SHIELD couldn’t even figure out. The Vice President had sold out the country. The Mandarin was an American. Is it so hard for SHIELD to fathom that a white American male would be a terrorist?”

She never backed down, never looked away. She was the tigress and he was the prey. “Well, it wouldn’t be the first time. And it wouldn’t be the first time someone in power was only there to make profit, and it won’t be the last.”

That zinger hurt when it hit true. He held his position though, staying a few meters from her and leaning up against the newly installed rails along the lounge area. “But SHIELD left it to fester, and little old me had to save the day.”

“You had an Air Force Colonel to help and about a billion dollars in armor support,” Natasha came back. She thumbed it back to Pepper. “Plus from what I heard you had hot Pepper here, too.”

His hackles rose. The flash of Pepper falling and being engulf by the flames blinded him of
everything. He blinked several times and took a long swig of his drink. “You know what, you come in here and attack me, for what? What do you want, Natasha? We have better things to do then to rehash the past, like Pepper said.” Inwardly he cringed. Part of him longed for those days, not the glory of the Iron Man, not the cocoon, but the calling. It spoke to him.

She eyed him, the drink in his hand, the way he tried to lean casually. The profiler was out and was merciless. “Well, SHIELD wasn’t all that thrilled that you didn’t call us in, or at least ask for the Avengers to help,” Natasha said. It irked him that she acted more at ease in his home than he felt.

“Like I said, I had it under control. My peeps and I,” Tony said. He downed the last of his Scotch and then balanced it on the railing. “Is this an official reprimand by SHIELD? Because it really doesn’t matter. I’m out of the superhero business, if you didn’t notice.”

“Are you so sure?” Natasha asked but her gaze focused on Pepper, who seemed more fidgety than usual. In fact Pepper was never a nervous nelly (whatever the hell that meant) but she was acting that way now. She kept playing with her hair, and throwing side glances to Tony. The subject of heroing and Iron Man truly bothered her.

“Since you’re so sure why don’t you tell me,” Tony said and knew he should have kept his mouth shut.

Instead of taking the bait though, Natasha quirked an eyebrow and said, “Tony Stark retired from fame and glory. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“And you cannot come here and try and lure me back,” Tony said and hoped his declaration would quell Pepper’s fretting as she chewed at her lower lip, and continued to tug at her hair.

Natasha studied both of them and then shrugged. “I suppose not. So then a warning. Stay out of international and national defense affairs from now on. If you’re not part of the Avengers, you really are just a private citizen.” She tilted her head and raised a brow, surely the picture of a spy assassin. “If you’re not part of the team, you’re part of the problem.”

“Like I said I don’t want to be part of your boy band,” Tony replied. He really needed another drink, but the bar felt a million miles away even though it was directly behind him. Natasha had roped him in and hung him out to dry.

“Are you so sure?” she asked. “You know, the pack is growing. Steve has Bruce, Peggy Carter, and myself.”

She said that to taunt him, Tony was sure. Too could play at her game and he cast his play. “Carter?” Tony guffawed. “She’s got to be a hundred.”

Natasha nodded. “A little less. But she’s his Guide. Which I think is fitting, don’t you think?” The tests and the queries just kept coming, she was a tigress but she was playing with her food. He stopped the urge to shiver in her presence.

Remaining charming in front of the inspecting eye of media was second nature to him. He could do this. Tony lifted his chin as he asked, “So what’d he name you? Spy girl or Lover?”


He considered the answer and his heart throbbed in his chest. He couldn’t parse why and he swallowed it down. Steve had seemed open to the idea of bonding with Tony, had agreed but the universe found him lacking. Found Tony Stark, the genius and hero of the Battle of New York wanting. He wasn’t good enough. He brushed his thoughts aside though it left him with a cold chill.
in his bones. “So learning all his secrets?” Part of Tony wished that the answer would be no, that she would never know his failing, that Steve had rejected him and he couldn’t be part of their little clique.

“Enough. He’s still getting his feet under him. He could use a few more friends outside of work,” Natasha said, her tone softer, kinder.

“I don’t believe SHIELD doesn’t play nice with Captain America,” Tony said but Pepper walked over to him. She placed her hand on his that was gripping the bar of the railing white knuckled.

“Is Steve in town? We’d be happy to have him over for dinner,” Pepper said. Her act cracked in front of Tony; he assumed that Natasha could read it easily enough. Pepper wanted his old life out of their life, out of his mind. She hated Iron Man, but not maliciously. He knew that he understood that, but the yearning still plagued him.

“Yeah, ask old Capsicle if he wants to hang out. See how the other half lives. How life can be great without all that,” Tony said and cringed inside. How much was he trying to convince her and how much was he trying to sway himself?

Tony noticed how Natasha neither confirmed nor denied that Steve was in town. Instead she asked, “Is Bruce around?”

The topic change eased Pepper’s tension and he saw her shoulders relax a degree. Pepper answered for Tony. “Yes, probably in his laboratory. The man is a hermit. Do you need him for something?”

Natasha smiled and it hid something that pierced Tony in the chest as firmly and completely as the bomb shards had. She said, “Not really.” As she moved to take her exit, she looked over her shoulder at Tony – all confidence and sex. “Might want to think about those Avenger floors of yours. If you’re really retired, what do you need them for?” She hopped on the elevator that JARVIS had waiting for her and disappeared before he could quiz her on how she discovered he’d planned floors for each of his teammates. He stood there, staring at the closed lift, teeth clenched.

“Tony?” Pepper’s hand shifted to his shoulder, bracing him, holding him, supporting him. But he didn’t want her support and that’s what damned him. He should embrace her, accept her, but he couldn’t. He had to face facts: he wanted this thing he had been denied.

Natasha? Bruce? Sure, he understood Peggy – Peggy had been Steve’s girl, everyone knew the story, the heart-breaking story of Steve Rogers and Peggy Carter. How their unrequited love lived through the decades and how the ghostly shadow of Steve hovered over Peggy even through all of her successful days. Once he returned and she had lived her life, the internet went wild about how Peggy – old and infirm – would never leave Steve. He would be haunted by her all the days of his life. It was circular, and tragic, and the internet and media loved it. They ate that shit up.

Still, Tony got why Peggy would be Steve’s Guide. It made perfect sense. At first, he could put the logical blocks together and figure out how Bruce made it into the inner circle. It made perfect sense if Bruce was designated the Healer of their team. Bruce had some medical background, he could be the medic – it worked. But then Tony hadn’t been chosen – Tony had been rejected. So it wasn’t about their team. It wasn’t about the Avengers. At all.

So Bruce made no sense. Hell, as far as Tony knew Bruce and Steve almost never saw one another. What kind of bond was that? Of course, Tony had no idea if they did the voodoo communication thing with their astral projections – whatever the hell that was. Now, Natasha became part of their little group and what a strange group it was. Natasha – a spy – a Russian assassin. What the hell kind of resonance did Steve Rogers have with her?
Vaguely, Tony got the impression that Pepper had been calling him more than once. He turned to her and her expression said it all. “It’s nothing,” he replied to her silent worry.

“It’s something.” She shook her head. “She upset you.”

Natasha came and exposed them, but neither one of them wanted to admit it. They were both the Emperor with no clothes, both pretending, both strutting and parading around and not allowing themselves to see. “That’s not it,” Tony said and tore away from Pepper. He loved her, he did. Talking about this – about Iron Man and his life’s calling – that was off the table. It wasn’t his life’s calling, not anymore. He gave it all up for her. He refused to revisit old wounds.

“It’s the team. It’s Iron Man.” Her whole body slumped in defeat. She had to admit their nakedness, she had to admit their vulnerabilities. “You still talk about it in your sleep, you know. You still do it. JARVIS sometimes even answers you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony said and needed to escape. Hell, they were having a quiet day, Tony successfully managed to keep his doubts buried deep until Natasha barged in and dug them all up again. He would not accept that his peace, his denial, was exposed. “It’s fine.”

“Is it?”

Tony remained silent. After a moment, he muttered an excuse that didn’t even make sense to him and left Pepper standing in the middle of their renovated penthouse. He hurried to his workshop and stood in the center of it. On the laboratory benches his latest work was spread out. All of his projects directly related to the company. Nothing was about Iron Man or the Avengers. He swept up his life as an Avenger and put it away, threw it all out. He accepted his place – by Pepper’s side, even if it meant that hollowed place inside echoed and grew – a vacuous wound. He touched where the arc reactor used to sit. Empty, cold, an abyss of his heart. He couldn’t even feel his heart beat.

He thought about Pepper, about her beauty and brilliance. Mostly, he grappled with how unfairly he treated her over the intervening months since the holiday, since the last of his armor exploded. He wrapped himself in a façade, brittle but glimmering, as shiny as any of his suit of armor. He pretended with the best of them; he knew how to walk through life putting up the showman while slowly creeping into a dark, dank place like a worm into a rotting stump. He shivered, because something in his core shriveled and dried.

As he went to sit at the laboratory bench, his hands tremored and he cradled his head in his folded arms. He had everything. He was a wealthy man with the world at his disposal. He’d figured this all out with that kid Harley and he blew up his suits and got rid of the arc reactor. Why did Natasha have to come and render him bare? Why did his core, his heart, his chest, everything – why did it ache?

He rubbed at his face and whispered, “Get yourself together.”

“Sir?”

He startled and grumbled at JARVIS. Sometimes he really wished to be alone. “If this is you asking what’s wrong, JARVIS, I don’t want to hear it.”

“No, sir. I wanted to tell you that you have a call coming through from SHIELD.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tony said. He almost refused the call. What the hell did Fury want from him? A letter signed in blood that he was out of the heroics business and the Avengers would have to look to
Rhodey for their air support since Thor happened to be AWOL (Tony did keep up on things – though only as anyone in the public could. Any person who could hack databases, that was). “Go ahead. Put them through.”

“It is a video call. Main screen, sir.”

Great, now he had to look good on top of everything else. He brushed back his hair with his fingers and wiped at his eyes before he turned to the large, overhanging screen on the back wall of his laboratory. Whoever called was far too close to the camera – Tony got a good look up the person’s nostrils.

“For Christ’s sake, get back from the camera. What do you want?” It wasn’t Fury, which was good because Tony wasn’t in a mood to deal with the director.

“Oh, sorry.” And Steve sat back and waved at the camera. Tony bit his tongue. Steve looked good. He wasn’t in that hideous spangled costume anymore, but a dark navy blue outfit with a silver star in the center of his chest. His hair style showed a more modern cut. He sported a relaxed, almost pleasant look – not haunted or angry like the last time Tony saw him over a year ago – or more. It was more. The Battle of New York took place nearly two years ago. A million years and the repercussions still ate at him. “Good to see you, – T-. Mister Stark.”

“Tony. My name is Tony I know that’s hard for your eidetic memory and all,” Tony said. He should be nice to the man. It’s not like they have to work together anymore. Plus, he needed to come to terms with the fact that even though his father had an obsession with Captain America, that guilt shouldn’t be laid on Steve Rogers’ obscenely broad shoulders.

“Sorry, just not used to it. Back in the day, it wasn’t polite to address someone by their first name if you didn’t know them,” Steve said, his voice stayed strong – no faltering at the mention of his lost days.

Another one that went straight to his chest. He didn’t know Steve, not at all. He didn’t know the leader of the Avengers. “Well, we’re a bunch of bastards now when it comes to manners. What can I do for you?” Tony asked. He both wanted to flee the call and to sit here and bask in it. Steve looked great. That dark dying part of him, settled in his core, lifted its head. It felt like sunlight.

“Natasha gave me a call and said you would be willing to talk,” Steve said. “I know we left it kind of in a bad place-.”

“Well bygones and all that,” Tony said with a wave. “Now, is there anything else?” He hoped to God that Rogers had something else to talk about – waiting for nearly two years to apologize for something that wasn’t his fault seemed awfully crappy. A theme in Tony’s life.

“Sorry, just not used to it. Back in the day, it wasn’t polite to address someone by their first name if you didn’t know them,” Steve said, his voice stayed strong – no faltering at the mention of his lost days.

“Natasha gave me a call and said you would be willing to talk,” Steve said. “I know we left it kind of in a bad place-.”

“That was months ago, years ago really,” Tony jumped in. He hated to think about getting rejected. Talking about it was off the table.

“Well, I wanted to let you know that I’m sorry it happened,” Steve said. True or not, the man’s voice rang with earnest emotion, and Tony suspected anything that came out of Captain America’s mouth felt like truth and justice.

“Well bygones and all that,” Tony said with a wave. “Now, is there anything else?” He hoped to God that Rogers had something else to talk about – waiting for nearly two years to apologize for something that wasn’t his fault seemed awfully crappy. A theme in Tony’s life.

Steve gave him that million dollar smile and part of Tony wondered if he shined the rays of the sun when he was a runt. Maybe that smile came out of a bottle, too. Or it was just Tony’s ache, that want inside of him for something beyond explanation. Steve was talking and Tony needed to catch up.

“So would that be okay? I mean it would be nice, don’t you think?”
Tony blinked a few times as if he could rewind the conversation. “What’s that? Sorry, lot of interference on the line.” He picked up a wrench and rattled it around as if that meant anything at all.

Steve took it at face value and repeated, “I’m going to be in town tomorrow to see Bruce, and I thought it would be nice to get together. Maybe have dinner?”

“What’s that? Sorry, lot of interference on the line.” He picked up a wrench and rattled it around as if that meant anything at all.

“Dinner with Bruce?” Tony frowned. Of course, it wasn’t about him, but about the soul pack. Could today get any worse? He snapped, “I’m not his secretary. You can call him and ask him. I’m not his keeper.” He went to cut the connection.

Steve chuckled – actually chuckled. When did he get to be in such a good mood after being stranded in a foreign age? “No, no. I’m seeing Bruce to check up on things and then we’ll go out. You and me. And Pepper, of course.”

“You want to have dinner with me? Why not with Bruce?”

“Bruce is going to have a quiet dinner with Natasha. I thought it might be nice. I mean,” Steve said and looked away before he focused back on the conversation. “I’d like to see you. I see Bruce enough, and Natasha all the time–.”

Natasha did mention something about Steve needing to expand his circle of friends. Maybe it wasn’t about the pack. “You see Bruce enough? When?”

“All the time,” Steve said. “I just saw him last week after I came back injured from an op.”

Injured? What the fuck was happening? When did it happen that he wasn’t in the loop? He couldn’t hold anyone accountable. Tony decided his path when a madman blew up his house and his girlfriend almost burned to death. He’d made the right choice. “Injured?” He found himself saying.

“Just minor, but since Bruce was named the Healer of the pack, we always have to go to him to get check out. Otherwise, well, you know what happens when Bruce gets angry,” Steve said and a lingering little joke hung in the air. Since when did tight pants laugh about Bruce and his problem?

“So that’s why I have to keep fixing his lab and floor,” Tony growled out.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Steve said. “We figured it out. Natasha is surprisingly good at – what they call profiling? And she put the pieces together. So I flew out to New York and had a sit down with Bruce at the SHIELD base there. He checked me over. We had lunch. It was nice.” Steve seemed so blasé about it like soul packs were every day occurrences. Not something special and coveted.

What a great little group of friends. And Tony had been excluded – like all of his life. In high school the teenagers didn’t want a pre-puberty dork skating around the edges of their lives and just shooed him away. It happened again and again, throughout his life. Why not now? He should have predicted it. The only thing that attracted anyone to Tony always centered on his money, influence, and power. Only Rhodey and Pepper had been different. He knew that in his bones, but why the hell did it still hurt so much?

“Do you need funding or something?” Tony asked. Going to a lunch or dinner to find out the new Avengers team needed a benefactor – no, he refused to do it.

“Um, no? We’re funded by SHIELD. All’s good. I just thought it might be nice to get together,” Steve said and the flicker of distance appeared in his eyes. He shifted in his seat. “But it’s fine if you are busy.”

“No,” Tony said. He grabbed on tight; this one wasn’t going to escape that easily. “No, I’m good.
Just wanted to know if I should bring my checkbook.”

“Just for dinner.” When Tony frowned at him, Steve only smiled. “Just joking. Meal’s on me. I’ll send you the address to the restaurant. It’s in Brooklyn. Hope you don’t mind.”

“I’m fine. Good. You do know how to use email, don’t you?”

Waving a smartphone at Tony, Steve scoffed. “You should be getting a text any second. See you tomorrow, Tony.” He smiled and then the video cut off.

True enough, Tony’s phone chirped and the message came through to him. Tony glared at the phone as if it betrayed him. He shouldn’t have agreed, but as he considered sending a message back to decline, Pepper walked into the lab.

“Are you all right, Tony? Natasha really got to you,” Pepper said as she wrapped her arms around him. He laid his head against her and tried to feel the warmth of her embrace. It meant the world to him; she meant everything to him. The tears prickled at his eyes and he shut them to shun the feelings – the empty, ragged need.

Later that evening after a quiet dinner where he did his best to sharpen his façade, he brought her to bed and followed her lead. He kissed her and caressed her. She touched him and licked him. Yet, nothing worked. He found himself impotent and dead in her arms. When she whispered it was okay, that it happens to everyone, a crackled laugh spat out of his mouth. He wanted to quote one in five, but instead he left her in the bed, cold and alone. He found his way, tripping over his own clothes, to the bathroom locking the door behind him. He ignored the long mirrors by the double vanity. The cozy Tuscan-inspired tile and light fixtures. He went directly to the shower, turned on the double heads, and closed the glass door behind him as he stood in the water fall.

He was happy. Just today. Just last night. He was happy. Yet the truth remained, he barely did make love to Pepper. Maybe once a month, maybe less. They were too busy, he’d tell himself. She never complained. But now he couldn’t even get it up to satisfy her. He left her frustrated and hot in a cold bed. He wanted to put a fist through the expensive marble tile in the shower.

The hot water beat down on him and he froze. His body trembled and that same odd ache in the center of his chest, his core, plagued him. Like an opened wound it throbbed and he placed a hand against his scarred sternum. Tony swore he could feel it bleeding. He needed something. What happened to him? He was fine.

But he knew he hadn’t been, not for a long time. Loose ends struggled for purchase within him. They tangled and danced as if in a wind storm. He needed grounding. He needed an anchor, and found none. Pepper had offered so much, including herself. There was nothing more for her to give and he found it wanting. That was how much of a pig head he was. A shit head, that was it. He had no right to find her less. She always gave and gave, abundantly.

But the truth hurt. It tempted him. The truth. It asked him to believe in fairy tales. He didn’t start it, not knowingly. He didn’t even accept that he was doing it. But his hand like a teenager’s crept down to his flaccid penis and began a long slow stroke. He told himself he was doing it to see if he could get himself to respond. He worked it slow and easy. Lying to himself. Pretending he wasn’t thinking of the strings of his soul that were disconnected and needy, yearning. Telling himself that he didn’t think about broad shoulders and thick arms around him. Even as the thought materialized he grew hard. His breath gasped and he thrust into his hand. The calluses on his palms, on his fingertips sent sharp shivers through him and he played with it a little. Edging his one callus on his thumb along the
tip of his erect cock, sliding a fingernail along the slit until he hissed in respond and felt a little precome spill out. He held back, letting the sweet anticipation and hunger eat away at him. He squeezed his cock, tormenting himself with need.

He fell into it, letting himself pound into his fist after a moment. His mind let him. His mind released him told him it was okay; it was all right to fantasize. His mind conjured the right images. Of the man, the man of his dreams holding him, touching him, kissing him. It was okay because he was bisexual after all. Even if he was in love with a woman, he still had his own urges. Everyone had urges.

Tony wasn’t cheating. He told himself these things as he fucked his hand and images solidified in his mind. As he reached out and thought about those burnt and ashen stings of his soul needing connection. Inside, he didn’t lie to himself. He let his imagination shine and his frayed ends merged with the one he was looking for, the one that he wanted.

Steve.

The man looked like a god, so good. Tony fucked his hand, hitting it hard as the water poured down. He rasped and panted in the shower as his balls tightened and he thought of Steve there, using his own hand, or better yet, crouched before him, ass in the air taking him all in, getting fucked and loving it. Begging Tony for more. Begging him to be hard, wanting him to use him. Wanting Tony to bond. Steve would beg him for that bond and then Tony came so hard, so fast that he screamed out a howl that sounded like a death cry.

When he came back to himself, Tony leaned against the side of the shower as the water still rained down, the words still on his lips. “Steve, Steve.” He murmured the name over and again. How could he be so screwed up? He didn’t even know the guy. They’d been apart for years. His soul didn’t bond with Tony. They didn’t resonate together. Steve found no place in his pack for Tony. Nothing.

The shudders left him and he stood there still shaking inside. What had he done? Christ, he was fucked up. Rising and cleaning, he finished up and left the shower. He wrapped a thick towel around his waist and then went to the rack to don an expensive robe. Dropping the towel, he put on the robe. When he walked out of the bathroom, Pepper had a suitcase on the bed.

Tony stood there, stupid and mute for a good five minutes as she packed. Finally, reality smacked him in the head and he reacted. “What’s going on? I know it was bad tonight. But it does happen to one in fiv-.”

“No, Tony, not you,” Pepper said and he could tell she’d been crying. “Not you.”

“Just-.” He raked fingers through his hair, feeling his nail against his scalp and then recalling how he’d imagined Steve’s nail scraping against his dick. Even recalling it, he got hard. The robe hid his shame. “Just, don’t.” He gagged a little. “Don’t do this. I can. We can try again. Right now.”

“Right now,” Pepper said and stopped at the dresser as she pulled out her intimate wear. The pretty panties, the beautiful silks and satins. “Right now. After you jerked off in the shower screaming Steve’s name?”

“Wha-what?” How could she have heard that? “No, Pepper, that’s not what happened. I’m pissed at him. He’s a pain in the ass.”

She threw down the panties and turned to him. Her eyes were red with tears. “Stop it, Tony. Stop. You barely touch me. Ever. I always have to start and initiate everything. You don’t want me. You never did.”
“That, that is not true.” He always wanted her, but he’s always been too stupid to want what was good for him, to keep what was good for him. “I want you. We’re getting married.”

“Not anymore, we aren’t,” Pepper said. She gathered up an armful of her intimate apparel and dumped it into the suitcase.

“Don’t say that. I can be satisfied and happy with you”

“Tony,” Pepper stopped and sniffled. “You don’t enjoy sex with me.” Pepper went to the next drawer and emptied it out. “Please don’t. Don’t say anything because it will just -.” She choked on her words and shook her head.

“Pepper, I love you.”

She paused and looked up from her suitcase. “I love you, too. And that’s why I can’t do this anymore. I can’t continue to pretend this is good. Because it isn’t. Neither of us enjoy it. I want someone who not only cherishes me like you do, but who’s turned on by me. You aren’t, Tony. God, I can’t recall how many times I had to -.“ She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Find the right guy. Stop lying to yourself.”

“I do. I loved being with you.” Even as the words tumbled out of his mouth he realized what he’d said.

“Loved.” She smiled weakly and closed her eyes. He glimpsed the tears released as she fought them.

He rushed over to her then, grasping her hands and holding them to his chest. “Don’t listen to me. That’s semantics. I love you. Pepper, please. Don’t do this to us.”

She opened her eyes then and nothing but loss gazed back at him. “You already did it to us, Tony. You already did.”

And he couldn’t argue. How could he? For so many months, for so many hours, he’d struggled with it. He’d donned a cloak to pretend everything was okay, that he’d found his place in the world. But his heart wanted and his mind tried so valiantly to shut it down.

“You never wanted this. You never wanted marital bliss. At least not with me. You want the heroics, Tony. You want Iron Man. Living here with me, watching your friends, your team mates rally on.” She shook her head and looked up to the ceiling for a moment as if to staunch the flow of her tears. “Every day I see you touch the spot where the arc reactor used to sit in your chest. Every day I hear the low sigh that you do to ease away the want. I can’t live like this and pretend it’s okay.”

“It’s not,” he whispered. He hated the idea that she acted as his confessional. “I want it. I swear I tried not to, Pepper. I swear it.” Now the tears freely came. The ache in his gut manifested, clear and harsh in the light. “I wanted to make a good life with you. I did. But-.”

“But you love me as a sister, not as a lover or a wife. You can’t stop being Iron Man for me. You never could,” Pepper said. “And I can’t stop asking you to not be Iron Man. What does that mean to me? I can’t do this to you.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” Tony whispered. He’d lost too much already.

“I know,” she returned but didn’t promise anything. A fresh wound hurt too much if it didn’t heal. She needed to recover before she could come back to him and be his friend. He understood it, with the logical part of his brain, but the rest, the rest felt like those stray loose ends in the core of who he was, aching and yearning for an anchor and finding none.
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter - Events unfold that change Tony and Steve forever....
Threads

Chapter Summary

Steve faces a beautiful parasite inside of SHIELD - and threads his soul to new members of his pack.

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter where I will purposefully cover one of the movies (CA:TWS).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The cliché of the punching bag didn’t escape him. He tried running and swimming and even some of those things like triathlon stuff, but nothing satisfied as much as a good old punching bag. SHIELD purchased re-enforced bags that hurt his hands and tore them up. Most of the time when he spent hours in the Triskelion gym beating the shit out of bag after bag he had to wait a few hours before he could use his hands again. Bruce always rung him up afterward to give him a good dressing down.

Yet the past few weeks felt like a raging river swept him away on its currents and he couldn’t grasp a handhold to get himself to shore. He found himself muttering the Soul Mantra over and again as he swung at the bag. Wong had taught them a whole host of ways to control the bonds, to work within the astral projections of the soul pack, to discipline his mind, but he found the good old Soul Mantra the easiest, cleanest way to do it.

“The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.” He battered the bag as he spoke each word and the memories of the last weeks slammed into him less like fond recollections and more like battering rams. “The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.” He didn’t want Natasha, or Bruce, or heaven forbid, Peggy to listen in on his scattered and slightly perverse thoughts.

Ever since that stupid dinner he’d had with Tony, things had gone wrong. He found it harder and harder to keep his head on straight. It wouldn’t do, not with tons of missions coming up. Fury, Natasha, even Rumlow and the Strike Team depended on him. He needed to get his head in the game. He smashed a fist into the bag and it flew off the chain, striking the brick wall, and exploding all over the floor. It joined the three others – sacrifices to Steve’s mental instability.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Steve relaxed, letting his arms and fists drop to his sides as Natasha entered the gym. The work day was over, so she was dressed casually. High brown leather boots over black jeans with a t-shirt to match. A light beige jacket over it wouldn’t keep the cold out, but it was spring and DC was warming nicely with the cherry blossoms nearly at their peak.

“Not sure if that’s a good idea,” Steve said. She’d been poking around ever since Steve came back from his dinner with Tony. She hadn’t outright asked, because Steve always kept his distance when it came to Bruce and Natasha’s little dinners. Even though they were all soul bonded, caring for one another and within a circle of protection, they all respected boundaries. Wong taught them that much
“You’ve gone through a good dozen or so bags since you came back from New York,” Natasha said as she stuffed her hands in her pockets. He never trusted her like that, hands hidden with stingers at the ready.

“It’s not really all that interesting,” Steve said, trying to brush it off. Natasha’s soul focused on information, curious and inquisitive. He’d learned that much about her – and more. Not only was she the soul pack’s Confidant, he had become hers in many ways. He was under no delusion that she revealed all her secrets. That just wasn’t like her. Steve often wondered if she had with Bruce, but that was none of his business.

“Try me,” Natasha said. “You want to blow this joint and get a burger? I know a place.”

“You know a lot of places,” Steve replied. He considered her as he unwound the tape on his hands. They were brutally ugly, bloody with knuckles torn looking more like he’d fought a meat grinder.

“Bruce is not going to be happy,” she said as she lifted a chin to acknowledge his injured hands. “You know he can feel what you do to yourself. We all can, but Bruce especially. You have to take care of yourself. Be careful for him.”

“What we all do to ourselves.” He tried not to think of Peggy, how difficult it must be for Bruce to watch her intelligence, her sanity, slowly leak away to age and disease. From what he understood, Bruce had taken to coming to DC to visit with Peggy on occasion. They played mahjong and had that ridiculous tea Bruce liked so much. Even that though, Steve felt guilty about since Tony had said something about Bruce and how much they were ‘science bros’ and at least he had that. It jabbed right into Steve’s heart.


“Okay, okay,” Steve said, not all too sure he was ready to share but he hated going down the pathway of despair when it came to Peggy. She had been his first and only love. Sure he’d looked at other ladies since, but nothing really moved him. His face warmed – until… He refused to think about it. “Let me catch a shower and I’ll be out in ten.”

“Sure,” she said. “Meet you in the garage.”

Burgers and beer happened to be drive-through and meet up at Steve’s apartment. They walked up and past the door of the nurse who lived across the hall from him. He rarely bumped into Kate. Nonetheless, Natasha slowed down in front of her door as if she wanted to listen in and see if the nurse might be at home. He only raised an eyebrow at her and then turned to unlock his door. They ended up in the living room, chowing down, with a six pack of beer between them, though Natasha bought a milkshake as well.

“So, Stark.” Natasha casually threw out the name as if she was tossing a ball to Steve in a friendly game of catch.

“Stark,” he repeated and finished off his first burger. Going to the bag, he pulled out the second burger with bacon and unwrapped it. He tried not to remember that dinner with Stark, how awkward and uncomfortable it had been. How Stark kept his eyes trained on something over Steve’s shoulder, so much so that Steve turned around to see if something – a bug or something – was crawling around on the high back of the wooden bench.

“He got to you. I don’t know how but he did,” Natasha said and sipped the milkshake. “You have
not been the same since.”

“You know Stark.” Steve tried for the evade, but Natasha just laughed at him. Bowing his head, Steve inhaled, held it, and then released it with a big downward movement of his shoulders. “It was weird, Nat, really weird.”

“You heard Pepper broke up with him. The wedding is off.”

“Yeah,” Steve said and flush of heat hit his face. “I heard they are always on again off again.” That dodge was just pitiful.

“Steve, come on, you know I can feel you. Even with the Mantra you’ve been saying twenty four seven it’s leaking through. What happened at that dinner you had with Tony?” Natasha watched him, eyeing him with not the softest look, but still kindness.

“The dinner was uncomfortable. I wanted to – you know – talk to him get his ideas and insights on the Avengers. The team not the pack. But he couldn’t look me in the eye at all,” Steve said with a shiver. Stark’s eyes bored into him when he did focus on Steve. It unnerved him. “He was taciturn and reticent.”

“Stark has never been accused of being reticent.” She reached for her fries, grabbed the bag, and sat back on the easy chair. “Something’s up.”

He studied her. He knew there were things he could implicitly trust her with – she wouldn’t rat him out. She couldn’t because of the soul bond. “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.” She tried to make it sound like it wasn’t a big deal. He made it one.

“Bonded. I want to talk bonded,” Steve added. Invoking the bond meant something stronger, truer than before. He reached out his wrist, his forearm where her insignia marked him.

“Okay,” she agreed. Leaning forward she touched her identical brand to his mark. When she did something within him, within his core – his astral projection – grasped hers, linking them in the soul bond. Her confidence was essential and not in question.

With hands clasped together, Steve started, “The night before my dinner with Tony, I had this strange dream or waking image.” She stayed quiet, listening to him. His face reddened, he had a hard time looking up at her so he concentrated on their linked hands as he said in a low voice, “It was perverse. I’m not, I didn’t grow up with the idea that it was okay. Not like today.”

“What do you mean, Steve?” Natasha whispered. The kindness touched her voice now with a stillness that meant tranquility and acceptance.

“I had this erotic- yeah, erotic dream of Tony,” Steve said. It felt like he was in a confessional and a priest would damn him to hell. He couldn’t even attempt to look at her, now. His eyes lowered. He stared at their hands tangled together through infinity. “I had this erotic dream, that I was- touching him. That I was str-.” Steve stopped, feeling the tears burn his eyes. “I could barely talk to him the next day. I had a dream I jerked him off, let him fuck me. I’m not that guy, Natasha. I was never that guy.” The tears dropped down his face and blinded him. She wasn’t in the chair across from him anymore. Instead, she settled on the couch next to him, her arm wrapped around his shoulders.

“There’s nothing wrong with being attracted to another guy, Steve. You know that, right?” Natasha’s hand squeezed his bicep. Their two marked hands still clasped together.

“No, I don’t know that. I grew up when it was a crime. I didn’t do it. Bucky sure as hell didn’t do it.”
Steve said, “Sure I heard of some guys who did. You know, the faeries.”

“That’s not a nice word, Steve,” Natasha admonished him, yet she kept her tone neutral, understanding.

“I know, but that’s how it was back then,” Steve said. Was he that way? Part of his soul trembled with fear of not knowing who he was anymore. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to deal with this. What I am supposed to do with it.”

“It was just a dream, right?”

“Just a dream,” Steve mimicked. “I wish. I was taking a shower after my run. I just – I felt him. Like he was right there. Touching me. I felt him.” The realism of the dream shattered him, the images the feel, the exhilaration of being with Tony.

“Maybe, maybe he’s supposed to be bonded to you?” Natasha offered, her expression worried him. She didn’t understand it any more than he did.

He covered his face with his hands breaking their physical link. “No,” he said. Muffled. He dropped his hands. “No, we tried it already. Tony came over to my apartment when I lived in Brooklyn and we kind of tried and it didn’t work. It felt all wrong.” Cross purposes that’s the only way that Steve could describe it, as if Tony’s astral projection perfectly negated Steve’s soul. It gave him chills as he thought of it. He glanced up at her in the darkening room.

The evening settled around them; the lights from the street below glistened and the shadows shifted across his apartment as she studied him. “Steve, I’m going to ask you a question and I need you to be honest with me.”

He took in a breath, held it, and then released it as he nodded. If she asked him that what would he say? How could he answer? Was he that way? He’d fancied girls, but that’s what he was told he had to like. Anytime he considered anything else, his upbringing would kick into high gear and he would shun the thought. Did the fact that he even had a thought or two along the way make him that?

She removed her arm from his back and then reached for his hand again, holding it tightly. “Did you feel violated?”

“Viola-?” He swallowed hard as he processed the question. “Like raped?” He shook his head. How could she even think that? “No, no, not at all. I wanted it. I -.” He closed his eyes and pulled his hand away from her again as the tears burned. The shame boiled over until he thought he couldn’t stand the taste of it, the feel of it. “I would have begged for it.” He should be locked away. Perverse. There was something wrong with him. “I’m so ashamed.”

Natasha leaned against him, the weight of her pressed against him felt good, felt like a needed connection when his mind jumbled into confusion. “Steve, you have to let yourself explore who you are. When did you ever have the chance to figure out who you are? From what I understand you were either sick or at war. You can like other men. You can be attracted to Tony. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

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“There are limits, Natasha, limits,” Steve said and his words felt like barbs on his tongue. “Limits. If you say I can explore who I am – what if I think I’m so right about something? I don’t listen to you or Bruce or Peggy. What if I lead us into hell? Everything, everything has limits, restrictions. Even this. Even whether or not I should be attracted to Tony.” He stood up and started to pace. His hands quaked with fear, anxiety, and embarrassment. “That’s what’s different these days. Everyone wants to stretch the limits. Everyone wants to get rid of the restrictions, the limits.”
“Steve, you’re both oversimplifying it and making it too complex. If two consenting adults want to explore who they are together – that’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with it,” Natasha said. “I’m not saying it’s a good idea to do whatever you like. There are limits to everything, like you said. But the truth is maybe your generation was a little too limited, too constrained. But even then if two men liked one another, wanted to be with one another do you really think they let society’s mores change that? If you restrict yourself, how will you know what you can attain? Who you are? If you’re limited in what you can do or see, you might just not see the stars or ever reach them.” She fell silent as the words penetrated.

He stared down at the floor running over what she’d said. Remembering that moment in the shower when he’d felt like he wanted to surrender to an urge he never even contemplated before. Not truly. How wonderful it felt and yet how empty when he realized he was alone and the perversion of what he’d envisioned dissipated into the steam of the shower.

Now, Steve let Natasha’s words wash over him as he thought about the possibilities, the potential. Could he? Would he dare? Steve glanced up at Natasha. “That was a little poetic.”

“Yeah, well, I am Russian. We like our poetry.”

He smiled, but then it dropped. Maybe he just wasn’t brave enough. “I don’t think I can do that. It isn’t me.”

“Well, your soul, astral projection, core whatever you want to call it, says differently. It might not be with Tony, because obviously you two are not bonded like that, but it could be with someone else. Maybe the universe is just telling you to keep your options open?” Natasha said and then grabbed her milkshake. As she sipped it, she said around the straw, “So, we gonna catch a movie or no?” That eased the tension and he sat back into the cushions of the couch.

“I have an early start tomorrow. Raincheck?” Steve said and she shrugged.

“Maybe,” Natasha picked up her fries but left the rest of the burger. “You want?” He only raised an eyebrow. “Of course you do. Does your whole salary go for food?” She stood up, readying to leave.

“You cannot imagine,” Steve replied. He walked her to the door. “Thank you for listening, Nat. It’s good to have someone.”

“Are you going to be okay if I go?” Natasha said but didn’t allow him to answer. She pressed her hand against his shoulder, gripping it and giving him some strength. “You don’t have to do any of this alone. You’ve come a long way figuring things out in the future. Look, you even have a cell phone and know how to use it.”

“Come to the future. See the non-existent flying cars, the pocket phones, and discover you’re a latent homosexual.”

She half smiled at his attempt at humor. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Steve, other than your love story with Peggy, were there any others? If not, why not? And don’t blame it on being skinny and small. Just consider what the universe and your astral projection are trying to tell you.”

“I will,” he said.

She hopped up on her tiptoes, kissed his cheek, and then opened the door. “You can always ask out your neighbor, Kate, and see how that goes.”

He watched her as she left, the sway of her hips, the curvature of her waist. He liked the way she looked, he enjoyed the way his neighbor looked as well. Closing the door, Steve went to the mess in
the living room and gathered it up. Maybe Natasha was right. It had been years, decades since he’d really thought about it. He kept it at bay since he woke up. He didn’t go out seeking someone to date. Sure, a few dates here and there with some of the ladies at the office, but there really wasn’t anything to talk about and he was sure once he dropped them home they talked to all of their friends on social media to say how awkward and dopey Captain America was as a date. He stayed off of social media. Going onto it early on during his re-entry into the world made him feel like he was one of those rockets they shot off to the moon and he burned up in the atmosphere.

. After cleaning up the food wrappers and finishing up the food, he went to shower. As he stripped, Steve considered Natasha’s words. Maybe he should think about asking Kate out. He might not see her a lot but when he did, she was always nice to him. Or was he just fooling himself? Trying to hide that he’d fallen down the hole of perversion.

“Is it perverse?” He spoke to no one as he stepped into the shower. Just wanting to be with someone. Loving someone, how was that wrong? He shook it away as he let the water fall. It was wrong. His upbringing had to mean something. Didn’t it? He couldn’t throw it all away. Otherwise, what was he, who was he? He wondered what his mother would think – and that cooled his sudden need. Would she be disappointed? Disgusted? She was a saint to him and he wouldn’t ruin her memory with his fears and doubts.

As he washed his eyes caught sight of the markings on his arm. His wrist had the original tattooed bracelet of his leadership of the soul pack. Up his arm he had Bruce’s circle and then along the side of it, almost touching Bruce’s was Natasha’s. The green and slight red of it reminded him of Christmas. It mocked him that way. Along the back of his arm nearer the wrist band was Peggy’s tattoo. He was glad it appeared there. He wanted some connection to her. He was glad she’d gotten on with her life, married, had children, was independent, and ended up founding SHIELD with Howard of all people. Her life had been good, and now he had her as a guide. He touched it. A slight sigh released from him.

How would she guide him? He smirked – he knew.

Stop caring what other people think of you, Steve. Your worth is determined by one person: you.

She’d said things along those lines enough to him.

Do you think I could have gone on all those years, if I listened to everyone else? If I let them determine who I would be, who I wanted to be? You have to decide. If SHIELD is right for you or if it is something else that will make you happy.

He should learn. He finished his shower and jumped out. Slinging a towel around his shoulder and another around his waist, Steve went to the bedroom. He dried and put both towels in the laundry bin and then pulled out his boxers and sleeping pants. Settling into bed, he thought about that horrible dinner with Tony. He needed to put it to rest. Regardless of his fantasy life, Tony couldn’t even stand being around Steve long enough to eat a decent dinner. The man left as soon as he found an excuse. It had been Steve’s fault – after all he could barely speak to Tony either. When he met Tony’s gaze, it bored into his soul and read every dirty little secret.

Talking to Natasha helped to a degree. He still needed to figure his way around his feelings, or through them. The problem stemmed from the fact that he didn’t know what his feelings were. Truth be told, throughout the months away from Tony, Steve had experienced other moments that called to him as if he had a bond with Tony. But their bonding failed and failed miserably. Somedays it was a ghostly feeling as if lost a limb and a phantom physicality called to him. Other times, it grounded closer to reality as if Tony stood right in front of him. He hated to admit it to himself, but touching Tony in that dream shower sequence, bringing him to an excited, exasperated state of yearning,
turned Steve on. Even as he lie in his bed, recalling those moments, he hardened.

He face flushed and he attempted to put the memories away, cut them off. He went through his Soul Mantra over and over but it only succeeded in solidifying the images until it felt as if Tony hovered over him. He swore if he reached out he could caress Tony, feel his sinew and musculature. He could compare his pale skin to Tony’s olive undertones and luxuriate in his warmth as he settled down on top of Steve. It felt real and perfect and Steve found himself rutting into his hand with a wild abandon. He squeezed his eyes closed and banished the images. It wasn’t right. It couldn’t be right. Natasha’s words whispered in his head and he swore. He pushed the phantom of Tony away and rolled over, but he stayed hard and needy. He tried to picture his neighbor but her face wouldn’t come to mind, he tried to think of a young Peggy, but all he saw was a grandmother figure with photos of her grandchildren on her side table. He thrust and he grappled to visualize anything – anyone other than Tony.

He couldn’t. Until he flopped down on his back again and Tony – his ghost – was there again. Tony smiled down at him and then Steve moved, shifted, opening for Tony. The slide and slip of Tony breaching him startled Steve but he accepted it. He wanted it, the heat of his need blinding him to right or wrong. Tony thrust in slow easy strokes and then Steve felt his hand encompassed by Tony’s ghostly hand. Together they worked Steve, as Tony continued an ever increasing rhythm. Steve couldn’t deny the heightened throb of his heart, the hunger coiling deep inside of him. He urged Tony and threw himself into the feeling, the intensity, and the rolling thrum until at last he succumbed to it. Opening eyes he hadn’t remembered that he’d closed, he met Tony’s gaze and a knowing streaked through them.

He shoved his hand away, his body still pulsating with orgasm. Trembling, the tears streamed down his face as he lie there cold and alone in his bedroom. Tony had never been there; it had all been his foolish, immoral fantasy. Steve sat up in the bed, shivered, and then crawled out of it. He staggered, still reeling from the intensity of his climax. Going to the bathroom he cleaned up, washing as quickly as possible and only clinically touching himself. After he went back to bed and stared at the shadowed images on the ceiling. The painted silhouettes of the street below wavered in the insubstantial moonlight. He let the motion of the flickering lights bring him back to his Soul Mantra, closing himself off, shutting down so as not to face the reality of how the future had corrupted him.

Thankfully, he had a restful sleep. Steve could do one thing well, and that was bury what bothered him. His generation learned to be stoic about hardships. Growing up in the Great Depression taught him a lot. He got up early the next morning for his run. He loved to run along the Washington Mall, seeing the monuments and the museums as the city came awake. He communed with the dawn and recalled what his life, his mission, was all about for him. Why he tried to do good. As he finished up his run, he met a guy – Sam Wilson.

Of course, Sam Wilson started his conversation the same way just about everyone did with Steve – about coming out of the ice and how it must have freaked Steve out. At that point, Steve said it was nice to meet Sam and turned to hurry away, but then Sam captured him – brought up the bed and how it didn’t feel right. Everything about that moment rang true to Steve. After nearly two years of Soul Mantra training, Steve could control his astral projection, soul from automatically bonding with just anyone he touched. It really never occurred just randomly, but he liked to get a heads up these days. As he touched Sam, a warmth spread, but it was quieted by Steve’s automatic control switch as he thought of it. It stopped any bonding, yet at the same time it told Steve that Sam would be more than a casual acquaintance. Someday he might be something more. What Steve wouldn’t know until he dropped his guard.

When Natasha called him with an urgent alert, he promised to catch up with Sam. He thought it would be like any other mission, like any other day. It was. Later, he saw Sam one afternoon at the
VA. Sam asked him pointed questions, yet Steve didn’t see it as a grilling, but a natural stream of
questions. They spent the better part of the night talking and joking. Sam was a good, solid guy.
Steve promised to call him soon when he left Sam’s apartment, but then the whole world fell down
around him and the pieces of his future that he built transformed into something ugly, a profound and
horrible evil. He found himself with Natasha taking refuge in Sam’s apartment, after Fury’s
assassination, after nearly being blown to bits in New Jersey. Steve stood with a folder in his hand
and Natasha by his side. The folder detailed something called FALCON and Steve discovered that
Sam was not a pilot at all but something fantastical.

“I can’t ask you to do this, Sam,” Steve said. “You got out for a good reason.”

“Dude, Captain America needs my help. There’s no better reason to get back in,” Sam stated. The
confidence, the trust, filled Steve with humility. He shouldn’t agree, but he did.

In a flash they were making plans to break into Fort Mead to retrieve the FALCON wings. Before
they left for the mission, Steve offered his hand to Sam. “I want to thank you.”

“Haven’t done anything yet,” Sam replied as he pulled gear out of his bedroom closet. It would
amaze the average civilian how ready anyone who’d ever been to war always was. The tactical stuff
Sam placed on the bed; Steve rummaged through it, picking out what they needed. Natasha hung in
the door, but Steve waved her in. She tossed most of what Steve picked out and decided on the
barest minimum of supplies.

“You’re doing a lot,” Steve said as he stepped away, letting Natasha work. For a second, he thought
about it, but he didn’t ruminate on his next action. Instead he stuck out his wrist and showed it to
Sam. “You see this?”

“Yeah, I might have noticed.” Sam dropped the night vision goggles and climbing gear next to the
bed.

“You ever hear of a Soul Pack?” Steve asked.

Sam raised an eyebrow and scoffed. “Yeah, but everyone knows it’s not a real thing.”

“Oh, it is, about as real as injecting blue liquid into my major muscle groups to completely physically
change me,” Steve said. “This is my band as the leader of the Soul Pack. It appeared nearly two
years ago.” He pointed to his wrist. Next he went through the rest of the marks. “This is Bruce – a
team member in New York. He’s our Healer. Here’s Nat. She’s my Confidant. Well, also the whole
group’s Confidant. This is Peggy, an old friend. She’s our Guide.”

“Yeah?” Sam furrowed his brows and didn’t comment. He side-eyed Natasha, who’d stopped what
she was doing and watched Steve.

“He’s always honest. Except remember he lied on his recruitment forms to get into the army,”
Natasha said and she started working again. She wound up cords and rope, grappling hooks, and
placed them into a backpack.

Steve gave her a half grin. “That is true.” He’d never considered trying to intentionally bond before –
but something, maybe part of his Core, told him it was the right thing to do. When he’d first shook
Sam’s hand just days ago, his soul warmed and accepted. It had only been Steve’s conscious control
of his astral projection that stopped the bonding then. “I bring this up, Sam, because the first time I
met you I thought we had a connection. I thought you might be part of the pack.”

“Oh.” Sam stopped. Looking between the two of them, Sam said, “You’re not joking.”
Steve put his hands up in surrender. “You don’t have to do this, Sam. It won’t change the way we work with you or think about you. Well, it makes it easier to work an op together. We always know where we are and the hazards instinctively.”

“It’s awfully fast the way you’re offering this to him. You don’t really know him all that well,” Natasha commented as she zipped up the backpack.

“I bonded with Bruce two days after I met him,” Steve said. “At least I’ve hung out with Sam once.”

“Good point,” Natasha said and then turned to Sam. “Might be difficult if he has a bad reaction. Remember Bruce didn’t go so well.”

“This is different. Plus while we’re on the road to Mead, we’ll teach him the basics, the Soul Mantra, the transference of mind. Everything that we need.”

“Quick and dirty, I like it.” Natasha turned to Sam. “In or out. We have a lot to accomplish and not a lot of time.”

“You can still come with us,” Steve mentioned. “But I’d be honored if you decided to join.”

“It’s a lifelong thing, right?” Sam asked.

Steve only nodded. Natasha took that as her cue. “Steve and I went through training. You will too. We don’t eavesdrop on one another. Like Steve said there are Mantras that help you concentrate.”

“Well, like I said, there’s no better reason than Captain America asking-.”

Steve stopped him. “It’s not Cap asking. It’s Steve Rogers, the kid from Brooklyn with an attitude.”

“Well, that’s even better,” Sam returned and reached out his hand. “How do we do this?”

“Simple,” Steve said. He didn’t offer his hand right away. “It might not work, and that means nothing about who you are. It’s just means our astral projections-.”

“Our what?” Sam screwed up his face.

“Your souls,” Natasha said and slung the backpack on her shoulders. “Hurry up. You’re burning daylight.”

Sam rolled his eyes and said, “Well, that’s the least romantic thing you’ve said to me.”

She smirked but Steve interrupted, “Natasha’s right. We need to hustle. So, Sam-.” He extended his hand and relaxed his thoughts, letting the Mantra fade as he grasped the other man’s forearm. Sam followed suit. It would happen in seconds, if it was to be. Steve recalled the first time he’d met Sam how he’d felt the faintest flickering spark. As he opened his Core and allowed his astral projection freedom, he experienced the resonance, full and synchronized almost immediately.

Steve had read it right. They were matched. As he met Sam’s gaze, the word tumbled out of his mouth, “Companion.” He grunted as the pain shot through him and heard Sam groan in surprise of the pain. Their hands broke apart as Sam gripped his wrist in reaction to the searing through his nerves that Steve knew all too well now. The brand burned its way onto Steve’s forearm, encircling the other brands but leaving room for others. It was the most intricate, the most encompassing of all of them. It connected to the wrist leader brand but also all of the other brands on Steve’s arm. When he looked over at Sam’s arm he saw a large loop with a weaving pattern throughout it, smaller brands that looked like Natasha’s, Bruce’s, and Peggy’s resided alongside it.
Natasha watched and smiled at Steve. “Good choice.”

“Well, sometimes you can’t fight the universe,” Steve said but he had to admit, a certain amount of pride and happiness warmed him.

“What’s that mean, Companion?” Sam said.

“Means you are Companion.” Natasha left the bedroom and Sam shrugged at Steve.

“What does that mean?”

Steve joined him and shrugged as well. “Listen, I don’t make the rules. You have the position of Companion. How it plays out, I don’t know. You’ll figure it out, do what comes naturally.”

“Well, does this mean we’re like BFF’s?” Sam said and Steve spotted an almost clear adoration in the man’s features.

“Right there. Don’t do that,” Steve said. Adoration as wonderful as it was only provided him nothing but hollow relationships. “Just- just be the guy I talked to all night after I stopped by the VA.”

Sam bowed his head but then he glanced up at Steve. “I can do that.” It helped a lot that Sam understood more of him than just the guy everyone read about in the history books. Being bonded to him strengthened Steve’s resolve. Coming to Sam, a guy he met on the street, had been the right thing to do.

“Let’s go get you some wings,” Steve said and Sam laughed as they left the apartment, Natasha leading the way.

Along the way to Fort Mead as Natasha drove Sam’s car, Steve and Sam sat in the backseat and went over the Mantra. Sam seemed a little jarred in some aspects as if he was talking on a phone with a lot of feedback. It took some time for him to quiet it, but they managed to get most of the worst of it under control as they approached the target area.

Getting the wings had been child’s play for Natasha, and Steve thought she even enjoyed it a little too much. He felt her celebration through the bond and only suppressed a chuckle as they headed off to find Sitwell. Sam took it all in stride and seemed confident and growing through the bond. During the car rides, Steve and Natasha continued to brief Sam on the Soul Mantra and how to work through the bond, how to control it, how to concentrate, and how to distance it. They also worked on seeking and catching as they liked to call it, where they used the bond to figure out positions and status through a mission. It was harder to do and test in the confines of a car, but they tried their best as they made the final plans to secure Sitwell. Steve knew these were stopgap measures and that he’d have to refer Sam to Wong’s tutelage as soon as possible, but Sam’s mind was lightning quick. He followed the instructions, asked all the right questions, and genuinely settled into being a part of the bond so easily it felt natural. Like he was supposed to be there all the time.

Then they captured Sitwell, and the intersection of their lives and Hydra’s purpose happened on the causeway. Natasha had called him the Winter Soldier, but Steve might have named him Death’s Knight. The fierceness of his attack launched Steve off the highway and through the window of a bus. Even as he picked himself up in the wreckage he felt the strings of flight and fear race through the bonds from both Sam and Natasha, though both of them managed to quell their panic and stay battle ready. Steve easily put down his attackers but then he felt the punch to his right shoulder as if he’d been shot and he knew through the ache of the bond that Natasha faltered and hid from the Winter Soldier. In a mad dash, Steve bolted over to her and stopped the Winter Soldier with shield to his fist. Each hit, each fist, and knife thrust blocked and avoided brought them to a strange and
horrible equilibrium. Evenly matched, Steve sought to find an inroad, a weakness. But then the weakness exposed was his own, when the Soldier’s mask came off and Steve stood dumbfounded in the middle of the street staring at his friend, his brother, Bucky Barnes. Only Sam’s appearance on the scene and Natasha’s firing of bazooka saved Steve as the shock deafened him to the din of the world around him.

Once the tables were turned and Rumlow had a rifle to Steve’s head in the middle of the DC intersection, Steve felt nothing through the bond. Just an eerie dissonance rang when he thought of Bucky – the Winter Soldier. His core shook, rattled inside of him and no Soul Mantra regardless of the complexity or simplicity would quiet it. A strange kind of paradox conquered him where the soul bond felt miles away and untouchable while his own astral projection broke down and fragmented into so much cacophony. What did his core, his astral projection want from him? He couldn’t fathom. He knew that his disquietude bothered both Sam and Natasha, but he sat in the bindings in the back of the SUV, stunned, shocked, and motionless.

That was when Sam spoke up and teased the bonds, not annoyingly, not to hurt but to build and recover. He wove words to bring Steve around, asking questions, but not judging, helping Steve see the light. And when Hill appeared and asked who’s this guy – referring to Sam, Steve said it all, “Soul pack. Companion.”

Hill startled as if she understood the significant of not only the soul pack, but the position Sam held. It was the closest to the position of Beloved according to Wong. Hill accepted him immediately after Steve’s announcement.

Getting to Fury’s squirrel hole out in the middle of nowhere ended up with Steve, Natasha, and Sam huddled together as they worked out their plans. Hill and Fury were also coordinating. Steve managed to get his soul to settle to a degree, but nothing felt right. His fingers were numb, his taste on his tongue prickled like barbed metal. His astral projection skewed. He wasn’t surprised when Natasha tried to tease out of him what was bothering him.

Natasha asked, “You’re in charge now. How does it feel?”

He shook his head. “Ask me when it’s over.” They stood in one of the old dam control rooms. It stunk of mold and mildew and the only light was a single bulb hanging from a frayed wire from the ceiling. He heard the trickle of water somewhere off in the distance but ignored it. The dam along a reservoir in rural Virginia was the least of his worries. Spread out before them was what was left of their tactical supplies and Steve’s shield.

“You’re not doing well, Steve,” Natasha said. “Your soul is shattered. All over the place. Are you sure you can-.”

“Yes,” he said. Maybe a bit too harshly. After all Natasha had been the closest person he had to family for the past two years. His stomach sank – all that time Bucky had been alive, working as a Hydra agent. How? Why?

She reached over and clasped his hand, brushed a finger along his wrist soul mark. “Some times you need to let the leader go and allow us to be your pack. It’s not just about protecting us, Steve. You know that. Let us in. I can feel you pulling away.”

Natasha was right. As he worked to put his soul pieces back together, Steve constructed a barrier, a wall that barricaded them away. He told himself that he needed to do it in order to keep his mind on the target, on what needed to be done. “Don’t worry. Just trying to focus.”

“You sure?” Natasha didn’t sound convinced, but at the same time he saw that she tiptoed around his
feelings – the one thing he just didn’t want to deal with right now. If he made it out of this fiasco, he would deal with those later. Not now.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He nodded. She accepted it, but she still hovered.

“Should we call in Bruce?” Natasha asked as she went over some of the supplies Hill delivered to them and then excused herself.

“No, this has to be stealth as much as it can be,” Steve said. “The Hulk is not stealth in anyway.”

Sam entered the room and the query of his soul pressed on the bond, but Steve gently brushed it aside.

Instead of confronting him, Sam sidestepped the issue. “You sure we don’t need the big guy?” Sam asked as he went through the wings to ensure no damage had been done to them by the Hydra Strike Team. Hill had known where to retrieve them from the bed of the armored truck transport. The wings and Steve’s shield. “Might be nice to have the big guy for intimidation purposes.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow. “That’s why we have Nat around.”

Sam accepted it, but then asked, “Can you do this?”

Steve shuffled through the plans on the table in front of them. Their ache for him leaked through the bond. “It’s not a question of whether or not I can do it, Sam. I will. Don’t doubt that.”

“I’m not, but I think we all saw your reaction of him. Right now, like I said, we’re in the situation where he’s the kind of guy you stop,” Sam said. “Are you ready for that?”

Steve picked up the shield and the uniform he stole from the Smithsonian exhibit. “I have to be, don’t I?” He walked away from them, left Natasha and Sam to figure things out. He needed to be alone. He needed to walk away from it all. The memories kept crowding in and he wanted to forget that he was from a nearly century ago with baggage and pain and no shared life experiences.

He changed, methodically. Every bit of him was becoming Captain America as he pulled on the pants, the shirt and jacket, the gloves. Steve couldn’t confess his fears, his trepidation to the team. They needed to focus, to be about the mission, not about Steve friend, his family. His need to find a way to save Bucky was his sin, his transgression, his weakness. He would do what he needed to do, but he would give everything to save Bucky as well. In his heart, in his soul he knew that Bucky Barnes could not and would not ever be Hydra – not willingly. They had a mission to accomplish, but for Steve – he had another mission as well. It didn’t escape him that he once accused Fury of adding extra covert missions to the main mission just days ago. He released a pent up breath. He needed to keep his head in the game and that meant ensuring the safety and well-being of people on that damned algorithm’s list. He picked up his phone. Steve wouldn’t be needing it, but right now he stared at it like it was a lifeline. His brain buzzed with conflicting emotions and he found himself flicking the phone on and connecting to Tony.

Almost immediately the phone connected and Tony answered, “Cap?”

“I can’t tell you what’s going on. It’s not a secure line. Get safe. Get Pepper safe.”

“You’re scaring me, Cap.”

“Then I did my job. Stay safe, Tony.” He hung up and something deep inside him quivered with
fear. If everything that Sitwell, Fury, and Hill said was right, then people like Tony would be on the chopping block. He had to keep focused, on target and not let his emotions lead the way. Even when it came to Bucky, even when it came to Tony. He did what he could and now he needed to zero in on the one thing of importance. The mission. As he went to meet up with his team, he spoke the Mantra out loud.

“The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul,” Steve said as Natasha, Sam, and Hill fell into step. He heard each of them chanting it along with him, even Hill who must find a simple comfort in it. When it was time to leave Natasha, he gripped her hand and said, “Keep lines open.”

She smiled. “All of them.”

He nodded.

His intentions were true. He honestly believed he would keep all lines open, that he would use the soul bonds, his pack, as his foundation, his anchor. Yet the same time Steve actively worked to keep it at a distance. Maybe he fooled himself, he refused to think about it. But as he stood facing off with Bucky something changed – his core vibrated with such agony the only thing he could do in order to finish the job was to shut it all down. He focused on one thing, the Helicarriers and getting them down. The man before him – he closed off and only thought of as the Winter Soldier. Saving him would be second, and it pained Steve down to his core, to his marrow to admit that, to battle with the automaton with his friend’s face. Echoes from the soul pack reverberated again and again like a constant knocking on the door, but he ignored it. He shunned his pack and forged onward, fighting his friend as if it was the last thing he would do.

When he finally pushed in the targeting blade and the bullet hit him in the back, he faltered and fell. He stared at the wound bleeding down his abdomen – the bullet had gone straight through him. In the very near distance he heard a wail as if the souls connected to him screamed out, trying to reel him back. He shivered against the cold and struggled to his feet. Listening to their calls as they suffered and struggled to survive the cataclysm and hell raining down upon them. Steve staggered, mourning the bonds linking him to them. He hated to think of them suffering, but his last act needed to be about Bucky, his brother. He closed off the beseeching cries along the tendrils of souls, severing them as if he cut off his own limb. He went to Bucky then, not the Winter Soldier. He went and begged him to remember. He dropped his shield, the pain in his gut burned through him like fire. He went to pull off his glove to touch Bucky, but it was too late.

“You’re my mission.” The words sliced into Steve, not because of how it felt to be set adrift from his life and family, but because of what it meant about Bucky. Bucky was truly lost, gone, forever the hand of Hydra.

Steve gave himself over to being beaten, to the strings of his soul as they splintered and frayed while at the same time he kept his promise not to let his pack suffer because of him. It had been his private vow. He wanted no one to feel the pain of loss and isolation, displacement and loneliness. As he spoke his last words, the cacophony of pain through the bond grew; they grappled to hang on to him, to cling to him. Yet, he spoke only to Bucky, “Then finish it, ’cause I’m with you ‘til the end of the line.”

As he fell away from the crashing Helicarrier he saw Bucky one last time, wide eyed, terrified, and he heard the soul pack judder in their horror. He released them, unburdening the bonds as simply as he would untie his shoes. He closed his eyes before the water hit. He sank and nothing but darkness and his bones feeling weightless and empty greeted him. He succumbed to the greater expanse of time and space – to death itself and welcomed it. No bonds on Earth or hopes in heaven, just the shadow world of everlasting sleep.
Until the irritation of life came back to grapple with him, to bring him back from the brink, to lay him on the shores of the Potomac. He only felt a rumbling in his awareness, like a light passing breeze shifted over him. No flesh against flesh, no skin to skin contact but as the shade who saved him dropped him on the bank. The words bubbled up even as water cascaded out of his mouth being ejected from his lungs. Bleary-eyed he rasped, “Brother.”

Maybe the bonds between family were strong. Maybe that was why he didn’t need the flesh contact. He didn’t know. Maybe it was the blood that spilt between them that sealed the pack, but the bond snapped into place harder and sharper than any before it. He wrestled up enough strength to open his eyes, to raise his hand in supplication. “Bucky.” He called to no avail, because his friend, his brother, only turned his head once to peer over his shoulder and then left. He abandoned Steve even as the soul bond wove between them. The pain spiked through Steve, his injuries eating away at him, but nothing could compare to the disgust and fear he felt through the bond. His mind tried to latch onto it, to parse it and understand it, but the strength to do so failed him.

Instead, he sunk onto the riverbank and reached out along the other bonds he had just tried to splice away from him. He found them strong and hurt but still there. Grappling, Steve tugged and comforted himself with the constant knowledge they were still there, they were coming for him, his pack. All was not lost. He released his grip on reality, collapsing into the void that reminded him of the hell within his nightmares.

Through the haze of pain as he moved in and out of darkness and shadow he felt the wind on his face and smelled the metal of blood. Steve welcomed the numbness but felt the cradle of arms around him even though they were cold and harsh. His body moved through the stages of pain and, for a moment, he opened his eyes and saw only the blue of the sky and the moon in the day light sky. His eyes closed with the heaviness of pain and he wanted to know who held him, but his powerlessness became his definition. Maybe it was Bucky, maybe he’d come back. Yet, the pain enveloped Steve and stole his awareness.

When he climbed back to consciousness again, someone stood over him. He couldn’t figure out who it was. The pain blinded him. He heard whispered words of concern and the sounds solidified until he recognized the doctors’ hurried commands, and then nurses touching him and moving him. Even though the fog of pain, he knew the comfort of familiarity. The one who’d picked him up from the riverbank, the one who’d brought him away from the smoke and death of the waters stood by him, held onto him. Steve sought that one figure, that one person to stay close to him. Steve reached out, his soul aching with need and yearning, and hands clasped.

Steve might not have been conscious, not fully so, but his astral projection realized more than he could. His energy ebbed and dissipated but his core remained vital, alive with the spark of life. It resonated, pulsating with exuberance. The strength and grip of the hand in his offered him support, but also showed him something more beautiful, more promising. The synchronicity of his soul with another took his breath away. He gulped for breath, and the doctors yelled directives and monitors screamed in protest. As they placed an oxygen mask over his face, he tightened his fingers over the hand he clasped. He wanted to stay, to remain, and to open his eyes. But he could not gather the strength.

He only murmured, “Beloved.” So swiftly then did darkness cover him in its cloak of nothingness.
Next up: Tony doesn't deal well.
Chaotic Waves

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of battle, Tony suffers the consequences.

Chapter Notes

I was overwhelmed and so grateful to all of you who read and commented on the last chapter! These comments really helped me when I was going through this chapter and doing the revisions that my beta suggested. I also added a few additional words because of your feedback! Thank you for helping to shape this story and make it better!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 6

A stone thrown at a glass house shatters it. A light breeze blew down a house of cards with ease. The truth of home terrified him. He stood in the middle of chaos as doctors, nurses, and the crush of people swarmed around him like a dysfunctional orchestra. He could only breathe out a few strangled words.

“What the actual fuck,” Tony said. People bumped into him, a nurse shoved him out of the triage bay, and he stumbled backward into the nursing station area which was no less busy. He glanced around the emergency room. His eyes felt grimy like he’d just walked through a sand storm. He rubbed at them, trying to focus, trying to gain ground on what the hell just happened. Dropping his hands, he caught sight of it- the mark- and staggered. He would have fallen if a nurse rushing by hadn’t knocked him forward enough that he had to switch his attention from his wrist to his feet.

He managed to steady himself again as he stared at his wrist. “What the actual fuck?” This time it wasn’t just a statement but a question of despair. Despair? Yes, because his heart might just have been ripped from his chest. His hand trembled in front of his face and he reached out to the wall. He staggered to walk, to find a way out. What happened? The word spoken snapped into place something profound and humble at the same time. A mass of confusion, heavy and thick, gathered in his brain like a thunderstorm. Tendrils of thought, of emotion, of pain wove through him like worms consuming his brain. He stumbled and found his way through the fog in his brain and the mess of the emergency room toward the exit only to collide with Natasha and some other guy with Maria Hill by their side. Each of them seemed amplified as if he saw more than just their faces, he saw depths and dimensions beyond their existence. Tony swallowed back the bile. He needed to get out, to escape. To find out what the fuck just happened.

Surprisingly a call from the side jerked his attention around to find Bruce standing next to the triage center desk. “Tony?”

He only managed to grumble in reply. Bruce was just Bruce but he seemed magnified, larger, more than himself. The loudness of his presence deafened Tony and he cringed in response to Bruce’s questions. He couldn’t answer them, the din around him, in him, muted any response. Bruce caught
hold of his shirt and dragged him along to meet Natasha and her crew.

Irritation leaked into Bruce’s words but Tony realized he didn’t just hear it, he felt the rising tide of Bruce’s anger as he said, “I can’t get in to see him. The doctors are working on him right now.”

Time dilated and the events of the last day meshed and faltered. He remembered seeing on the news a release that Steve Rogers was a wanted man. He’d called up Rhodes to find out what the hell was going on.

“There’s a mess at the Pentagon right now. Some factions are with SHIELD others are standing their ground and saying that SHIELD has it wrong,” Rhodey had reported to Tony.

“I don’t see how Rogers would have anything to do with killing Fury. He’d only do something like that if Fury was dirty,” Tony said and had known that it would be more than that. Fury would have had to cross a line, a line deep in the sand that would cause Cap to be a party to killing him. “Can you find out what’s going on?”

Rhodey had agreed, but it was all too late. Before Tony could parse the import of the events leaking to the news, Steve called him and told him to lay low. To get Pepper safe. To stay safe. He had sounded like a man with a mission, a vital one. In the hours that ticked by before he heard about the attack, Tony went to find Bruce to see if his science colleague whom he spent many an afternoon shooting the shit, had any insight. Bruce was nowhere to be found.

Now Bruce stood before him, harried and a shade of grey green cooling his temples. How did Bruce get here? Why was he here? A distant memory threw the answer at him like a storm hitting him in the face: Healer. He needed to see Cap – immediately.

“Hill, can you do anything to help out?” Natasha asked, seemingly ignoring Tony. Yet the streams from her soul – and, fuck, he read her soul – tensed like a cocked gun that was ready to fire. Her outward appearance belied the underlying worry.

Hill eyed Tony but concentrated on Natasha and the situation at hand. “I can see what I can do, but the fact is you released all of SHIELD’s dirty little secrets on the web.” She moved to the reception area anyhow and leaned over to talk to the nurse on duty.

Natasha let out a breath and then cursed. “He deserves everything. Everything that’s happened to him. He should have listened.”

“That’s not nice,” Tony mumbled, but Bruce was the one to jump in and calm her.

“We don’t know his story, we don’t know what happened.”

“We do. We know he just cut us off. I couldn’t feel him. Could you? Like a wall. He constructed a wall. I didn’t even know he could do that,” Natasha said. “I didn’t know anyone could do that.”

“Well, the Mantra helps you to compartmentalize your life, right?” the new guy said. And who the hell was he?

“That’s not the point,” Natasha said and Tony swore to hell and back he saw red vibrate around her like a halo. That on top of the other noise in his head rammed the headache starting at the base of his skull to full intensity.

He wanted desperately to disappear and just walk out of the hospital, but an invisible tether tied him in place. Tony indicated the new guy. “Who’s he?”
Bruce and Natasha shared a look that somehow resonated in Tony’s head. He furrowed his brows as he watched them in their silent communication. Natasha answered, “Tony Stark, this is Sam Wilson. He’s part of Steve’s soul pack.”

Sam offered his hand when Tony didn’t accept the offer, he only shrugged. The refusal hadn’t changed the man’s demeanor at all. He said, “Nice to meet you.”

Natasha narrowed her focus on him as if she drilled into his head. He tried to shut her off, trying not to feel the connection. She dove in twisting along the tendrils tying Tony to the pack. He saw the realization, the subtle way she closed her eyes and steadied herself before she looked at him without emotion again.

Tony inwardly shivered, and then turned back to Natasha. “Tell me what the hell is going on? I get a cryptic phone call from Ste-.” He paused because he never called Rogers “Steve”. Not in front of anyone. Not now. Not like this. Their relationship didn’t work that way. “Cap, I get this weird phone call from Cap telling me to get safe. And then he hangs up. Thank fuck, I’d been working on new armor. It barely got me here, but I fucking found him and flew him in. JARVIS about had an AI seizure trying to get me here.”

“How?” That was the new guy. “How’d you find him?”

“Scanned for traces of vibranium.” He growled. That was a lie. He never found the damned shield. Somehow he found Steve, right on the side of the shore like Tony knew he would be there at that exact spot. “Shit.” Something indescribable trembled inside like an earthquake shaking buildings at their very foundation. He shifted focus, pushed it aside and looked for something calming. The armor. He recalled the dizzying moments of flight as he forced the armor to launch into the air, as his heart screamed at him to hurry. It was more than the need to help; it was fear. He closed his eyes and shook his head as it occurred to him that he left the nascent armor on the street outside the hospital when he arrived with an unconscious Captain America in his arms. He’d only just started to rebuild his arsenal, the armor and the Iron Legion, since his breakup with Pepper.

He turned back to the matter at hand. “I don’t know where the shield is, not really. Maybe in the Potomac. He was on the shore. Beaten and shot, several times. Don’t have any idea how he got there. He was mumbling gibberish, about that old friend he had during the war.” That was all true, but some part of it felt off, wrong like Tony tried to conceal something important that he really didn’t even know he had.

“How?” Natasha asked. Her wide eyes spoke volumes but it sounded like a rattle of noise to him.

“Yeah, I guess. He was delirious.” Tony looked amongst them. It hit him then like a wrecking ball to his gut and he clasped an arm over his abdomen and groaned. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Bruce grabbed him, steadying him so he wouldn’t pitch over onto the floor. “Are you okay? Do you need to-.”

The vines of the bond pulsated with life and the agony streamed through them. Hot and angry, it constricted. He shook his head. He knew it wasn’t him, the pain in his gut didn’t originate from any injury or condition he had, but from elsewhere along the bonds.

“It’s not him,” Natasha whispered and grasped Tony’s shoulder. “It’s Steve, isn’t it?”

When he glanced up at her, he glimpsed a weariness in her eyes but also mirrored there the pain that ate away at his gut. It wasn’t him at all, the hurt bled through the bonds from Steve.
Tony snapped to focus on Bruce. “Do you understand what the hell is going on?”

“Not much, but maybe we’ll share our story if you share yours?” Bruce said and pointed to Tony’s arm.

Immediately Tony cradled his arm against his chest. The damage had been done; at the very least Bruce had seen it. Clear as day. Even as he concealed the markings, Tony burned with pain. Not the brand, not the fucking soul bond mark that he’d wished for and hoped for all along, but from the shared agony from his bonded – from Steve. When he looked around the group, everyone except for Hill had a haunted, almost gaunt look to their eyes. They felt it, too. Is this what it meant to be part of the pack? They shared everything. The joy and the pain?

“Listen, man, you can’t go hiding it that way,” Sam said. “Take it from me, this stuff isn’t even twenty-four hours old for me and you cannot do it alone.” He seemed like a reasonable guy to Tony, but at the same time, trust never came easily.

Tony curled his arms around his torso, not allowing anyone to see the markings that wove up his arm and disappeared under his short shirt sleeve. He’d intended to wear the under armor that he had been working on, not just a Dead Head t-shirt, but time too short.

“It might be best if you let us see, Tony,” Bruce said. “We could help with the noise in your head.” He gestured for Tony to reveal the markings. “It’s the least I can do, considering we haven’t been allowed to see him yet.” The annoyance rang through the bond like a bell struck close to his head. He flinched a little. “You need to let us help you.”

Tony considered them. He felt like he was on the playground and everyone was triple dog daring him to stick his tongue on a frozen pipe. That was not going to happen, but still the noise in his head ratcheted up a degree and then the grinding pain in his belly and leg hit. He recoiled and Natasha grasped his hand and yanked.

“Christ, Stark, let us help,” Natasha said, holding onto his hand.

He met her gaze. For the longest time since she entered his life he could only manage words like “inscrutable” and “powerful” to describe her. Now, as she clasped his hand, different images of her came to mind. Softer images. Visualizations of her speaking in low tender tones, wise and gentle filtered through to him. He knew those were not his memories and it scared the hell out of him that these people – these strangers – had access to his mind. His most private thoughts were no longer his own. He shivered like a cold breeze hit him. He wanted to tug his hand away, rush off from the hospital, get back in his armor, and leave. Escape. The idea they were in his head, rummaging around, plucking at his thoughts, his hopes, his desperation, his nightmares roiled him until the noise around him, the chaos around him avalanched over him. He put his hands over his face, trying to block them out. He needed safety, away from this- away from all of them.

His armor – that he left in the corner of the hospital entrance as nurses and doctors helped to take Steve away. He needed his armor. His armor had been his cocoon. Pepper had accused him of using it as a distraction to the wider problems he refused to face. If there was any time in his whole damned life that he longed for the cocoon of the armor, the shelter and solitude of it, then now was it. But the fact that they could invade his privacy even in the armor did not escape him.

“Let us help, Tony,” Bruce said. “I’m the Healer of the group. Do you want to talk to me first? Alone?” He pointed in the direction of the hallway. Tony surmised that a waiting room or somewhere private must be that way.

Tony knew through the link it was the last thing that Bruce wanted to do; something primitive drove
Bruce to be close to Steve, to help Steve. Even Tony felt the lure, the pull to gather around him. As Steve’s life hung in the balance, what would happen to the pack members? What would happen to him?

“Can you get rid of this?” Tony asked. The branding on his arm mimicked what Tony remembered of the wrist mark on Steve. Tony also sported other marks that mirrored the ones on his other pack mates’ arms. Now that it finally happened, he wanted it gone. They were in his fucking head. Why did he have all of their marks intertwined and leading up his arm – he could feel it crawl over his chest. “Can you? I want it gone.” It wasn’t a promise of family or friends. It was a god damned infection and surely Bruce knew that identified the organism that plagued them.

“Relax,” Sam said. “I don’t want to be there anymore than you want me there. Can someone teach this dude about that Soul Mantra thing.” Sam rubbed at his temple and squeezed his eyes closed. “It’s like a buzz, a very loud buzz. He’s giving me a headache.”

“We really should be more concerned about Steve,” Hill muttered and drifted away from the group. She sidled over to the nursing station again.

Tony noticed the glare from Natasha and she grasped Bruce’s hand, stopping him from following Hill. “Right now, we need you to take care of Tony. Steve’s in the best hands.”

“He better be,” Bruce said and the itching to be there, to cradle Steve, to offer solace. Yet, those feelings originated from Tony – not from Bruce. The mixture of emotions collided in Tony’s head. He squeezed his eyes closed for a second trying to clear his brain. When he opened them again, Sam grimaced.

“You’re head is all over the place,” Sam said and blinked a few times.

Natasha shoved Tony over to Bruce. “Talk to him. I’ll deal with the Birdman.”

“Hey!” Sam said but Natasha dragged him away. Bruce took it as his cue to force Tony to follow him.

With a glance toward Hill and then one to the triage bay where he had last seen Steve, Tony went with Bruce. Waves radiated off of Bruce oscillating between calm and rage. Tony tried to wall them off, tried to get a grip on where his feelings ended and Bruce’s began. Bruce led them to the hospital café and they order coffee (burnt) and muffins (stale). Bruce didn’t seem to mind the culinary state of the food or drink. He gobbled it up without pause. Tony only sipped his coffee.

“Tell me what this means?” Tony finally said as they both hunched over the table in the booth. The red and orange colors of the café irritated his already fried brain. Lamps that looked like rejects from the 1970s hung over each table. Fake red leather cushions lined the benches of the booth. He gagged a little at the bright orange color of the Formica table top. He had an orange Audi that didn’t puke the color as badly.

“It means you bonded to Steve and our pack. It can be overwhelming at first. Hell, I went Hulk. But you can do this. I thought you wanted this?” Bruce munched on the muffin even as it crumbled apart.

Tony cringed at him going to town on the cake as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks. Not true, the man always ate like two pizzas when they got together weekly for lunch. “I did. I did. But I didn’t expect.” And the roar of noise overwhelmed him then – the scream in his head of others. How the hell could anyone think with that noise? Din and clatter at the same time with little defined sounds or words or anything! He flinched and closed his eyes even as they prickled with tears. The pain Steve suffered topped all of the noise, ached in Tony’s own gut. “How the hell do you handle all the
“Half of it is feedback,” Bruce said and he sat up straighter and brushed off his hands. “Yep, that’s you. Most of it is you. How noisy your own mind is will dictate how much feedback and noise you get. The rest is the whispers of your pack. Now I use a certain meditation technique, but I know that Nat and Steve and probably Peggy have been schooled on the accepted Mantra methodology.”

“God, this is getting worse,” Tony said and for a second the nausea swelled until he clamped down on it, and drank the horrible coffee, coughing a bit. He refused to believe it was his brain causing this, but at the same time, Tony could not continue in this state. He needed it to stop. “How do I stop it? How does anyone ever get out of this?” The racket of thoughts banged around in his head, not like a pinball game but more like the clash and collide of a landslide. “I never got the impression anyone had this type of problem.” He spent time with Bruce; they worked together in the lab. Although Bruce never spoke of the soul pack, Tony supposed it was out of some weird respect either for the integrity of the soul pack or understanding that Tony wasn’t a part of it.

“Like I said it’s feedback. The stronger the bond gets – and right now it’s establishing itself so it will get stronger – the more reason you have to feed it,” Bruce said.

“I’m not following?” Tony blinked the tears away.

“Your astral projection is linking up with ours. Steve has a pretty organized head, but right now while he’s in pain and being cared for by the doctors here, not so much. That leaves chaos.” A flash of need sparked through the bond as Bruce talked of Steve. Tony wondered if it was the same with all of the pack members; did Bruce feel this way for each of the pack? At the same time the racket running through the bonds made it difficult for Tony to parse who was giving off what signal. Tony recalled the moments after he’d touched Steve, how the triage bay around him swirled with madness. Was it mess of busy people or just the clutter of his own brain?

“Because he has such a good grip on his thought processes, we routinely don’t have a problem,” Bruce said. “But it does happen. If I get too involved in some project and don’t do the daily meditation my thoughts start feeding back to me, like an echo.” Bruce sighed. “It’s a reflection. Your thoughts colliding with others in the pack. Like ripples in a pond. You throw one stone, you get one ripple. You throw a bunch the ripples interact, some additive, some subtractive. It messes with your head.”

“But why?” The headache robbing him of logical thought processes caused the room to loop around in ever increasing circles.

Bruce laid a hand on Tony’s arm. “Close your eyes. Right now is not the time to understand the soul pack on a scientific level. Now, you need to learn the Soul Mantra – it’s a chant. Listen to it, and repeat it. The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.”

A stupid sentence. What the hell? He cursed but he repeated the words. “The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.” He swallowed down the need to vomit as if the words poisoned him. The terror clenched his belly but then it just ricocheted with pain from Steve. Steve was in so much pain Tony’s eyes burned with it.

“Keep repeating the words over and over. Listen to the rhythm of your words, the sound of your breath. Let it soothe you.” Bruce murmured the sentences again until Tony pronounced them in a sing song way, losing himself in the cadence of the chant. Both his hands covered Tony’s as they leaned into one another across the table.

Usually, Tony found this type of intimacy disturbing and frightening. Part of him attempted to pull
away but the sound of the words transformed and melded not only into sounds but something more. The words reached into him, defining him and turning him from solitary to bonded. It terrified him. He wanted to tug away, but the bond drew him, lured him within its weavings. It mesmerized and hypnotized. It felt as if it became part of his blood, his bones, his breath. It grew out of him.

“Now, approach it like a scientist,” Bruce said even as Tony continued the chant. “Analyze it. Try to understand it.”

Tony drank in what Bruce said. Evaluate it, assess it, measure it, figure it out. He had been made to do that. His life defined him as a scientist, an engineer, an inventor, a futurist. This was the future, being part of a soul pack. It was one of the reasons that finding acceptance into the Avengers’ soul pack had been so important to him. Not only as part of the team, but the integral brain of the team, understanding their team functionality. As he spoke the Mantra, he let his eyes close again and discovered the fear dropped away as he sank into the words, the core, the soul.

What was it? How could he comprehend it? He sought the answers along the bond, the strings that wove separate beings together into an intricate, elaborate astral net. He strummed it and listened to its beating – the heart of it. The echo of his own soul threatened to overwhelm him, but he zeroed in on the Mantra again, if only for a moment, to ground himself and then focused on the harmony around him. Within the center of the song, the souls bonded to him, something called to him. He shuffled all the rest of the songs aside, the different frequencies because they were not really musical sounds or songs, but various frequencies of energy. He pushed toward the centerpiece to find the echo of his own core, pinging back at him. But the Mantra did not still it, did not muffle it.

Instead it called to him.

As if it was someone else.

It called in a perfect sequence. And then he saw it strewn out around him in a haze of figures and equations, and the unification of it robbed him of everything – of his breath, his sight, his ability to think or process. It unified him.

The Mantra stopped in his mouth and he opened his eyes. He spoke the word that had been delivered to him as a gift. “Beloved.”

Bruce tilted his head and quirked his brows. “What’s that?”

The realization hit Tony like a truck. He grabbed at his chest and, for some odd reason, missed the arc reactor. He scratched at the scars left there by injury, by the reactor, by surgery, and then shook his head. When he’d hoped to be part of the pack, he thought he might claim the moniker of guide, sentinel, futurist, maybe even intellectual but not this, not something so wholly disgusting to Steve. Tony stumbled out of the booth. Bruce followed his lead as Tony found his way out of the café and back to the triage bay.

“What? Tony, what’s going on?” Bruce said reaching for him to stop him.

Tony halted right before they approached the emergency room, right before they rejoined the group. Gripping Bruce by the shoulders and trying to stem the flow of his own tears, Tony said, “He called me, he called me Beloved. I have to know, I have to know what- what it means? What does it mean?”

“Let’s see if they’ll let you in,” Bruce said. He sounded reasonable, but a flush of green over his cheeks stopped Tony.
“What?” Tony narrowed his sights on Bruce. “You’re not… you’re worried?”

Bruce shook his head. “Don’t go there, Tony. You don’t know what Steve’s been through. Hell, I don’t know what he’s been through. You can’t expect him to answer your cosmic questions right now.”

It deflated Tony as he considered Bruce’s words. He was right, of course. Right now, Steve fought for his life just meters away from Tony. When he’d touched Tony and murmured the words, the bond felt bright, brilliant, but also brittle as if it might snap. The reality struck him and he swallowed down both fear and anxiety. “It might not stay. It’s not strong enough. He’s not strong enough.” The idea that Steve might die hovered over him. What if he died? What would happen to all of them? What if Captain America died? Dizziness swam over him.

As Tony tugged away from Bruce’s grasp, the other man held tight. “What do you mean?”

“The bond,” Tony said and bowed his head. He had wanted it. Then he could only freeze in terror of it, and now he mourned it. What the hell did he want? He didn’t know, he couldn’t tease apart his fears from his excitement. “It’s not strong. He wasn’t strong enough at the time.”

“His astral projection resonated with yours. It’s a bond.” Bruce kept a hand on him and it intensified their link. “Listen to me, Tony, the bond isn’t going to break.”

“What if he dies? Does anyone know what happens then?” Tony asked and Bruce had the good grace to pale and not to go green.

“He won’t die,” Bruce muttered to himself as if he checked something internally, and then spoke to Tony. “His astral projection bonded to you. To you. There’s no breaking it.”

Tony had no idea what the hell Bruce was talking about but he said, “Okay?” The way the bond felt – tenuous, fragile, but also precious and welcoming – caused Tony to quake inside with hope and with horror. “It’s not going to break, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Bruce said. “It might break, if-.” He stopped himself before he laid those words out in the universe. But Tony wanted to know, he needed to know. The idea of death within the pack scared the hell out of him and shit he’d only been in the pack for a few hours. Not even a handful of hours yet. Bruce continued, “But right now, we need to worry about Steve’s wellbeing.”

Tony agreed, because what else could he do? The urge to rush into Steve’s triage bay and throttle him – asking him what the hell was going on – surged but Tony quelled it. He needed to think outside his own needs. He saw Steve’s condition; he cradled Steve in his arms. What he experienced between that moment and this felt like a lifetime. His emotions splayed out and fragmented. He didn’t even have time to grapple with what had happened.

“I think I need to go,” Tony whispered. Bruce screwed up his face.

“You don’t want to wait and find out what the doctors have to say?” Bruce asked. Judgement along with shame filled his eyes. They had worked together as science brothers all these months, but the soul pack stood between them like a wall. Now it transformed into a wall of thorns and agony. Tony needed to get away from all of their prying eyes, their minds, their souls. He needed safety.

He needed time to process. “I just need some time to process.” A deep ache filled him and he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Take care of him, okay?” Tony said as he dropped his hand. “I need to go.”

He didn’t let Bruce dissuade him; he never gave him enough time. The rest of his run from the
hospital blurred by him as if he’d suddenly flashed through the world in hyperdrive. He ended up in
the suit, rocketing toward New York. He’d nearly made it fifty miles before his brain kicked in and
asked him what the hell he was doing. He stopped in mid-air, hovering over the web of highways
linking Washington DC with Baltimore and points north.

JARVIS queried him, “Sir, are you unsure of the course? I could plot-.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“You are causing quite a stir.”

For a second, Tony continued to hover, floating in the air above 95 North, and then he realized that
the traffic on the roadway stalled out, causing an already congested road to thicken with more cars
and trucks.

He couldn’t leave. He would be repeating what he’d done to Pepper over and over again. He left her
mentally, emotionally, before she finally left him physically. He knew nothing of what this link, this
bond to Steve, meant. He wondered at the beauty of the frequencies, the perfection of what a soul
bond actually was. He needed to take control of his fear.

Instead Tony curved around in the air and headed back to DC. As he made his way toward the
hospital the smoldering remains of the wreckage from the downfall of SHIELD lay before him. He
landed near what was left of the Triskelion, opening the face plate and surveying what was left of the
building. As he stared he ordered, “JARVIS, get me Rhodey on the phone.”

Waiting, he watched as emergency crews started the chore of clean up. Some injured were removed
and hustled away in ambulances. God, what was he doing out here. Why wasn’t he back with Steve
– with his pack? Even out here, the ring of the pack resonated in his head.

“Tony?”

He flipped the faceplate back in place with a simple command. “Rhodey.”

“Are you okay? Military is moving in to secure the Triskelion wreckage as well as the Helicarriers.”

“I’m good, I’m fine,” he said and shook his head. “Actually I’m less than fine. I need to know
something Rhodey.”

“What’s that?”

When it came to it, he couldn’t voice his fears, not in the details he needed to in order to make
Rhodey understand. “Nothing. Just wanted to check in and make sure all was good, considering
everything that happened today.”

“Rogers is going to have a heap of questions to answer,” Rhodey replied.

“From what I saw, he did the right thing.” Tony saw the data dump. Although he hadn’t the time to
analyze it, the clear headlines of Hydra infiltrating the main defense apparatus of the US government
happened to make headlines. It was fucking trending on twitter already. There hadn’t been a need to
spend anytime digging for that.

“Yeah, he did. Military is verifying. Also the higher ups are not too pleased to know that some of
their orders came from Hydra.”

“I bet. Well, keep me posted,” Tony said and didn’t wait for Rhodey to respond. He shot up into the
air and said, “Let’s look for the shield.”

Tony relented and gave over the controls of the suit to JARVIS so that he could spend his time scanning the river for the shield. It didn’t take too long. When he arrived in the new armor he’d just built to find that chaos in the skies of DC, Tony had concluded either that Steve and SHIELD were under attack by unknown hostiles or that the reality that Steve was a fugitive from SHIELD might be the worst-case scenario. But then JARIVS alerted him to the data dump of all of SHIELD’s secrets onto the web with the salient parts being highlighted. SHIELD was Hydra and Steve was fighting an old foe.

Finding Steve on the riverbank shocked Tony as he flew low over the scene. The deep-seated tug inside of him Tony ignored at that moment. He pretended it was nothing but instinct, but now he realized it must have been something more. He’d picked Steve up, ruined and beaten, flying him to the nearest hospital. JARVIS guided him. Even as he left the suit at the entrance to the emergency room, holding onto Steve as nurses and doctors surrounded them, Tony’s heart hurt. He couldn’t describe it in any other way. The pain spread and when he touched Steve’s hand as the nurses begged him to leave as Steve was placed on the gurney Tony felt something shocking and pure in his chest. In a daze, Steve awoke, focused on Tony for one pristine second, and spoke one word, just the one.

“Beloved.”

As Tony recalled the word he dove into the water and plucked out the shield. The debris field encompassed the whole of the river. Across the shore, the cataclysm of helicarriers dropping out of the sky still smoldered around him. He headed toward the hospital with shield in hand. Ignoring the flashing lights along the roadways, the gathered emergency personnel. How many dead? How many Hydra? What had he been living under all these years? Had his father known?

The idea of Hydra being involved in the United States government sent a shiver down his spine. Instead of having a precious bundle of Captain America in his arms, he carried the shield. He landed amidst the bustle of media and medical personnel clustered at the entrance of the hospital. As he left the armor to the side of the doorway and told it to stand guard, Tony picked up the shield and walked into the hospital. There were reporters swarming the lobby, almost clogging the entranceway to the emergency waiting room. Someone had to do something. It was the least he could do – plus it didn’t hurt that as soon as he walked into the place, the reporters erupted and gathered around him.

“How is it true that Captain America attacked the US government today?” one yelled as phones and microphones were stuck in Tony’s face.

Another reporter screamed, “There was a large data dump from SHIELD. Reports say that there might be a Nazi affiliation within the United States government.”

Before any other reporter could say anything more, Tony put his one hand up as his other clutched Steve’s shield. He drew on his years of experience with the media to gather the courage to speak, to keep his voice strong and unbroken, to present the face of the Avengers.

“Today, Today-.” He waited as the crowd quieted. “Today, Captain America saved America. Lots of times we like to ignore what’s going on around us. It’s easy that way, right?” He asked and several of the people closest to him nodded. “It’s easy to go along with our daily lives and just ignore that little voice in the back of your head that maybe the Patriot Act might be a little too invasive. Maybe those rules about how the government treats whistleblowers are just for show. We all love to hang out on social media, stream the good shows, find out what’s happening with our favorite teams. And we can do that. You know why?”
Quiet descended. Even the nurses to the sides of the lobby and the security guards trying to manage the crowd stopped to watch and listen.

“Why? Because Captain America, Steve Rogers, has our backs. He’s there to protect us. Did he attack the US government today?” Tony scoffed. “The US government attacked you today.” A murmur went up in the crowd. “Steve Rogers saved you today, all of you. He’s upstairs right now, fighting for his life because he did the right thing. He fought for what this country stands for, and as for me? As for Iron Man? I stand with Captain America.” He raised the shield up and the crowd went crazy with cheers and questions. The energy electrified his nerves and sent a rush of hope through him and he tried his damnest to push that further along the bonds tethering him to Steve.

He started to shoulder his way through but the force of the crowd overwhelmed him. A hand landed on his shoulder and a loud voice announced, “Avengers business, coming through. Coming through.”

Like the Red Sea, the people parted, and Clint ushered Tony through the crowd and into the hallway to the elevators. Without pause, they stepped into one of the elevators and Clint moved in front of Tony as if protecting him as the doors closed and people peered inside. Tony noticed Clint in his SHIELD uniform, bow and full quiver strapped on his back.

“I see you got a call, too.”

“Something like that,” Clint said. “Nat called me at home. Got here as soon as I could. Not soon enough.”

“She just tell you to get somewhere safe, too?” Tony asked. He was still ticked off by that. The bond between the pack beat like a living thing. Inwardly he spoke the Mantra as he listened. Calming his brain so he could think straight happened to be a top priority.

Clint turned around as the lift rose. “Yeah, that’s it. Told me to get somewhere safe. I mean what the hell?”

“Yeah, right?” Tony agreed. “We’re supposed to be in this together. Like the fellowship or something. We’re a team.” Even without the pack, they were still the Avengers. Sure, when he worked with Bruce in the lab, they avoided talking about the team, but it was still a team. Or was it just a pack now? In the background the pack bristled and Tony cringed at the feedback. “The Avengers, you know?”

Clint raised a single eyebrow. “Well, you did blow up all of your suits.”

“And you dropped off the face of the Earth,” Tony snapped back.

“Touché,” Clint said but didn’t deny it or explain it. He crossed his arms over his chest and grumbled, “You see all the shit they dumped on the internet?”

“JARVIS updated me,” Tony said. “Some of it is still encrypted though. It will take ages to go through it all.”

“Most important thing is out there,” Clint said and swore under his breath as the doors of the elevator opened. “Fucking can’t believe it.”

“Neither can I,” Tony said and they both exited the elevator. Tony glanced around the corridor of the hospital. It had quieted in the short time Tony had been gone, and Clint waved for him to follow. Since Tony had no idea where Steve might be now, he said nothing and allowed Clint to lead.
“He shouldn’t have done it,” Clint said. “Do you know he didn’t even call in Bruce? Bruce is part of his fucking pack and he decided to take down all of Hydra on his own, Like he’s a fucking-.”

“Superhero?” Tony supplied.

“Yeah,” Clint said with a twist to his lips. “I can’t believe it. I really can’t. This is not what I signed up for. Not Hydra.”

“All of our childhood dreams eventually get tarnished,” Natasha said as she walked over to join them. She looked tired, a little broken. The fact that Tony could read that spoke volumes. The nursing station on the floor was subdued and maybe that was because of the armed guards milling around it.

“Not all of them,” Tony said and lifted the shield. “I found it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I thought you left.”

“You thought wrong,” Tony said and shoved past her. He didn’t want to face his own demons, and he wasn’t going to face ones she challenged him with right now. “Where is he?”

“They moved him to a private room. Sewed up some of the worst of it,” Natasha reported. Her voice sounded tired, older than it should. He should give her leeway; he literally could feel the throb of exhaustion in the soul bonds. Yet at the same time he read relief through the bond. The worst of the worry for Steve was over. “Took out the bullet in his leg. The one in his abdomen was straight through. They did nothing but put some compression pads on that one. The serum is taking care of it. Sam and Bruce are in there now.” She pointed to the room.

Through her summary, the high pulsing need to be with Steve thrummed through Tony. He swallowed down the acrid bile and frowned. Outwardly he jerked in surprise of the clear pain.

“Yeah, one of the misfortunate effects of the bond,” Natasha said.

“Like he’s the center of our universe?” Tony not only tasted the bitterness but felt it infect him. He thought he would be happy. But the idea of so many people jostling in his head and that he – Tony Stark – would center his life around this one person. That Steve Rogers and he were Beloved for one another seemed just this side of crazy.

“No, it would happen for anyone injured in the pack. It’s just especially hard because he’s the fulcrum. Which I realize is the center, but you’ll learn that each of us play a role and are equal. Just because he has the leader wrist mark doesn't make him the dominant person,” Natasha said and she sighed. Her purpose had moved on. “I need to go and talk to Wong. He’s coming in and I need to see if he can help us with Steve. Can you?” She thumbed it over her shoulder.

Who the hell was Wong? Tony had no idea but he agreed nonetheless. “Yeah, we’ll be here,” Tony heard himself say as Clint hugged Natasha. He heard the archer whisper something into Natasha’s ear and she smiled.

“Don’t worry, I knew what not to leak,” she said and then Natasha took off before Tony could ask what she meant. Clint seemed satisfied but not willing to share.

Tony would have spent time quizzing Legolas about his secrets, but being so close to Steve set off the echo in his head again and he squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to balance. He went through the Mantra. It might be a crutch but at least it hushed the reverberations of his own thoughts in his brain.
He might need to stay as far away from Steve as possible if this was going to be a plague in his head all the time. Clint watched him with a critical eye.

Tony showed him his wrist. “Lucky me.”

“I thought you wanted it,” Clint commented as he started to round the nursing station. Tony had no other choice but to follow. “That’s what I heard anyway.”

Apparently word got around, he needed to talk to a guy who had a tendency to turn into huge rage monsters. “Not exactly what I thought.” He couldn’t explain the terror compounding in his chest as the cacophony of noise boiled over in his head.

They headed toward the room assigned to Steve. “Be careful what you ask for,” Clint muttered and Tony almost barked out a reply but just as he stared the guard in front of Steve’s room shifted into their path.

“Hmm, excuse you,” Tony said. The guard passively looked at them, both bored and slightly less impressed than he should be. “This is Avengers’ business.” He held up the shield a little to show the soldier.

“Orders are no one is to enter the room of the Captain unless specifically allowed.” The soldier looked like he was fifteen to Tony,— but he was probably around 25. Around the same age as Steve when he ended up in World War II.

“We’re his team,” Clint said and Tony swore he witnessed the muscles of Clint’s biceps tense as if he might pull an arrow right now.

Thankfully, the door to the room opened and Bruce greeted them. “It’s okay, Lt. Sharp. They can come in.” The soldier considered Bruce and then stepped aside. He kept his automatic gripped tightly in his hands.

As they entered the room, Tony asked, “Is he there to protect Steve or to imprison him?”

Bruce scowled. “We think to protect him. The US government’s got egg all over its face and a ton of people are trying to clean up and say they had nothing to do with Nazis.”

Sam bowed his head; arms crossed over his chest. Tony did not like the judgement in the man’s eyes. “So the prodigal son returns. You drop him and then decide to come back?”

“Are we really doing this here?” Tony asked as he placed the shield on the floor, propping it up against the bed in which Steve currently slept. Tony hadn’t looked at him, hadn’t focused on the patient or the man he was now forever bonded to. Maybe he just couldn’t make it a reality. If he did how would he ever get out of it?

“As good a place as any,” Sam said but it was Bruce who pushed them apart.

“This is a hospital room. Take your testosterone laden fight outside.” Bruce shook his head. “This man needs rest. The serum won’t work well if he doesn’t get it.”

Sam curtly nodded in agreement. He opened his arms and raised his hands. “No fight here. But we’re having a serious conversation about the pack-.”

“The pack?” Clint jumped in. “What about the team, the Avengers. Ever hear of that? We have priority. We were here first-.”
Bruce growled and everyone stopped. He chuckled. “That actually worked. I can’t believe it worked.” He cleared his throat. “Let the man sleep. Go outside and fight. Not here.”

In the end, they all cowed to Bruce’s words. They decided on a visiting schedule, but Sam insisted on being first to sit with Steve. Tony resented it, but it would give him time to work on the Mantra as well as figure out what the hell he wanted out of this soul pack thing. He spent days, months, hell, years hating the idea that he’d been left out but now, he skittered away. He needed time to adjust. That’s what he told himself. He agreed, but before he left the room he asked, “Can I have a minute?”

Sam eyed him, but it was Clint who pulled him away. “Hey, new guy, buy me a cup of coffee.”

They left the room and Bruce lingered at the doorway only to slip out as well. Tony stood there, a meter from the bed but his feet felt like lead. Moving through his hesitation robbed him of any courage. Thank fuck that Steve was still out of it. The machines hooked up to him chirped along, showing a strong heartbeat. Yet the pain radiated from him, through the bond as if even in slumber the agony persisted.

Tony forced one foot and then the next; his heart like hammer in his chest. He studied Steve for any sign of wakefulness. Steve’s face was battered, split, and bruised. His brows stayed furrowed even in rest. His mouth was slightly parted. Tony glanced down at his abdomen where the compression packs held Steve together and something trembled through Tony. It reverberated in the bonds through him and into the man who called him Beloved. Tony shivered. A nausea roiled but he kept it back.

Lord, he’d fantasized about this man. Thought of Steve touching him in intimate ways and Steve looked no older than the young man pretending to be soldier out in the hallway. He wasn’t all that old yet, not at all. He was only in his twenties. Tony had crossed over into his forties years ago. Worlds apart. Looking down, Tony glimpsed his soul mark, a mark he so desperately wanted. It had ruined his relationship with Pepper. He’d never given thought to why he wanted it so badly. He shied away from the truth, that a forty-something year old man could still be haunted by his childhood torments of not fitting in, not having friends.

And now he was someone’s Beloved. What did it mean?

He reached out and touched Steve’s hand just to see – just to find out if something would happen. Steve lay still like the grave and that thought drilled a hole wide and gaping in Tony’s chest. What if Steve had succumbed to his wounds and died? What if Tony bonded only never to feel and know the potency of the bond, never to know Steve at all? It ached more than the pain of the arc reactor ever did. But the touch, the touch only whispered something that Tony found hard to comprehend, so he closed his eyes and listened.

The touch sang through his core, through his soul. It sang and told him acceptance. The soul pack it welcomed Tony, but he wondered if Steve would welcome him. Opening his eyes, he gazed down at Steve. He recalled their hissed words, their awkward dinner, their cross purposes at every turn. They were hardly even friends how could they possibly be something more? How could Beloved be their link. Bruce had told him to look at it scientifically and his brain went to equations and frequencies. When Tony measured how he could possibly bond with Steve, the equation became a quandary, an unsolvable question. But to the universe – Tony was Steve constant, and Steve was Tony’s constant. Universal constants linked together through some metaphysical soul.

How could he accept it as so? He isolated himself after Pepper, after everything that happened with the Mandarin. It worked for him. He didn't need to deal with complications of people and their problems. Tony was enough of a problem to deal, he couldn't deal with others. His soul juddered as if it fought his own brain, his own thought processes. Tony yearned to be with Steve, to learn about
him, to see why the universe linked them together - there must be a reason. He was a man of logic even if his emotions drove his actions sometimes. Yet to shatter all of his defenses, break down his walls and allow Steve and a whole pack into his brain, his heart, his soul, that terrified him. He couldn't let it happen. What would they think of him? How would they judge him? How would his childhood hero judge him? Letting them in and letting them know his weaknesses - no. That could not be.

It was all a foreign concept to Tony. He let the tears come but only because no one saw them. In the end, he knew he had only one course of action, only one way to deal with the universe’s cruel trick.

Beloved – he recalled the words whispered on blood stained lips.

Stained by violence and death.

He would not be at the end of the universe’s horrible joke. Reaching out, he touched Steve’s hand again. Their souls synchronized and it ached in Tony’s chest as he murmured, “You made a mistake. How could you ever think it? I’m not your Beloved. I never was, and you’ll never be mine. I’m sorry.”

He let Steve’s hand slip away and the absence of it hurt. What was he doing? He wanted this, he needed this. But did he deserve it? The burn in his throat, the sting in his eyes, the rap of his shattered heart answered him.

He stepped away from the bed, turned away. Gripping the door handle, Tony bowed his head but couldn’t look back. “I’m sorry.”

He left.

Chapter End Notes

Next week's chapter may be a little late. My beta reader is going out of town for the holiday and I have a few things on my plate that might complicate matters.

Next week chapter - Steve and Tony finally confront one another.
Traveling Home

Chapter Summary

New members of the pack mean new problems for Steve...

Chapter Notes

Phew got this in on Sunday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Steve climbed his way to consciousness, the first things he noticed were the music and Sam sitting close by. He spoke and Sam smiled. It should have been all that Steve needed to feel grounded again, but the dissonance running like an undercurrent in his core caused him to flinch. He shifted awkwardly in the bed and Sam jumped up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You need to stay put, soldier. You took a couple of shots that still need mending,” Sam said. The pressure on Steve’s uninjured shoulder forced him to remain in the bed. He met Sam’s concerned gaze and tried not to react, but his body betrayed him and shuddered against the pain. The heart monitor beeped away but it couldn’t mute the noises rising from the soul bonds. “It was him, wasn’t it?”

Steve tried to answer but he coughed instead and that just set his insides on fire. Sam went around the bed and poured some water into a plastic cup. He offered it to Steve, who sipped it and the cool water alleviated the burn in his throat. He gave the plastic cup back to Sam. “He saved me.”

“He also beat the shit out of you, didn’t he?” Sam said as he placed the cup next to the pitcher of water.

“You don’t know him,” Steve murmured.

“I know enough that you invited him into our little pack, didn’t you?” Sam said and turned over Steve’s wrist to display two new marks. One of them connected to the wrist band and wove down but stayed separate from the others. The other one tangled through Steve’s wrist mark and shot through all of the others and continued up Steve’s arm. He peered at it and then realized it didn’t stop on his arm.

“It goes all the way to your chest if that’s what you’re looking at,” Sam said. “This one is his, isn’t it?” Sam pointed to the lone one – the solitary one.

Steve had barely been conscious when it happened. He fought to remember, to pull up the images of the Helicarrier. The cold look of Bucky standing in front of him came first and it quaked through him like an avalanche. Every moment of the battle came back to him in horrible relief. He hadn’t wanted to fight Bucky. When Bucky finally shot him, Steve knew it was the end – and part of him didn’t care. Part of him died right then and there. When he’d gotten a chance to try and claim Bucky again, bring him back to himself, show him the way, Steve latched onto it. Every move had sent spikes of
pain through him, but it was worth it.

“I didn’t even touch him,” Steve said and the moment solidified as Bucky saved him and then dropped him on the shore. Steve had reached out – not with his hand but with the waves of his astral projection. The resonance had been deafening and the word bubbled up. “Brother.” The memory shook his astral projection until he saw Sam wince in reaction to the juddering waves. Steve pulled back from the memories and quieted the vibrations through the bonds. Though he glimpsed the subtle furrow of Sam’s brow reflecting both Steve’s own confusion and the chaotic noise coming from Bucky. How was Bucky even handling all the feedback in his head? Steve needed to find a way to send quiet soothing waves toward him.

All the same, Steve stated, “He’ll come back.”

“He’s a wanted criminal,” Sam said.

“He’s a victim,” Steve replied. “We need to find him. Get resources together and search for him.” The idea that Bucky, loosed from his Hydra bindings but at the same time captured by the soul pack, might react badly to the muddled minds in his head only served to increase Steve’s fear. Of all of them, Bucky needed direction and assistance. How would someone so lost grapple with the ties of the soul pack? The last time he’d seen Bucky, the beat of his soul resonating with Steve’s only served to drive him away. As Bucky left him by the river, the glint of metal and the bleed of the shine of it in Steve’s eyes blinded him. But then again, Bucky hadn’t been the only one to save him that day. A comforting shadow had appeared and brought him, carried him to the hospital. He’d flown? The wind gently hitting his face and the quiet words spoken to him as they flew to safety came back to him. But how? He wasn’t sure because the memory blurred out.

“Who?” Steve said and tried to move. Again Sam placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Stark was there. He picked you up from the river, brought you to the hospital. His friend or AI or whatever called Nat.”

Too many input points barraged Steve – he had a newly bonded pack member without counsel as well as an assassin roaming DC, but Steve also needed to face the new truths of what had happened moments after arriving at the hospital.

“Stark?” It fell into place then, the horrible truth. Steve shuffled in the bed and Sam groused at him to stay still. “Tony Stark?” Steve hitched in a breath and his lungs tightened on him. The monitor beeped in protest. It couldn’t be right. The first time he’d tried with Tony, the soul bond fell apart. It unraveled. No. No. No. Maybe his anxiety came from the two new members, or the pain spreading out from his wounds, not the deeply seeded fear he’d managed to hold at bay all of these years.

“What is wrong with you? Calm down,” Sam said as Steve’s kicking upset the tray table, knocking it over and the phone with it. It tumbled to the floor.

“I can’t.” Steve said. He needed to get his head in gear and get Sam out of the room. He had to think this through, figure out what the hell was going on with his astral projection and with the entire soul pack. So he settled. When he eyed Sam, Steve stopped his complaints. He buried them, letting out only calm waves along the bonds. For now. “I can’t believe it, that’s all. Tony hasn’t exactly been a great member of the team.”

Sam furrowed his brows and said, “Isn’t he the one who rammed that nuke up the Chitauri’s ass?” Sam had a point. A very definite, important point. Tony sacrificed, he tried. Steve needed to recognize his willingness to lay down on the wire. He shifted in the bed again, but it hurt so he
stopped. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“Well, I guess he needs to be part of the pack,” Sam said. “So what did he get?”

Steve mumbled up. Every other image of the emergency treatment when first delivered to the hospital faded into oblivion but that rang clearly like a clarion bell. Beloved. He picked up his hand and rubbed his temples in feigned exhaustion. He wasn’t ready to share, not now, not with the pack and surely not with the world. Though he knew that Sam would never betray his confidence, Steve still needed to sort things out for himself. “Do you think I could sleep a little more?”

Sam studied him for a moment but then nodded. “You know we were all worried about you. You cut us off. You tried to go it alone. You promised us to use all the lines and then you didn’t. I’m new to this stuff but I know how a team works,” Sam said.

“I know,” Steve said and recalled the moments he struggled to cut off the bonds, to isolate himself. His actions, he’d told himself, were altruistic. He hated the idea of any of his pack being subjected to the pain, the loss, the trauma of separation from everything he loved. He knew how that was, had experienced the bitter taste of isolation.

As if reading his mind, his Companion said, “Separating from us felt like you punched a hole in my chest. I nearly didn’t get out of the Triskelion alive. You gotta know how important you are.”

“Just because I am the leader of the pack doesn’t make me more important than anyone else, Sam.” Steve rejected the idea of a hierarchy in the pack. They were equals. The team – well the Avengers needed a leader, but the pack they operated on a level playing field.

“That alone makes you important. How would we get along without a leader? What would happen to the pack if we lost you?” Sam asked, his expression deadly serious. “Do you even know? The loss of any pack member can send us all to hell and back, but the leader – it scatters us. You get that, right? You understand that?”

“How do you-.”

“Nat spent some time talking to someone in New York named Wong,” Sam said. His arms were crossed over his chest. “He told us.”

“I didn’t know,” Steve said and looked down at his battered body. “I didn’t.” He should have and that’s a fault in his leadership.

“The pack works well only if we do it together.”

“I get that,” Steve said, a little chided over what he had done. He worried now that his actions might have led to dire consequences for the rest of the pack, ones he could only imagine. “I just need to sleep now.” Before he left, Steve added, “That phone. Could you put something quiet on it? On the tray table?”

Sam adjusted the table and picked up the phone. He put on some soft jazz and then said, “Sleep well, Steve.”

Steve waited until Sam left and then reached for the device. Luckily, it was still open and not locked. He went to the browser, searched for his favorite site for soul pack information (it was not Wikipedia anymore). The site was maintained by his favorite guru, Wong.

Steve needed to understand more in-depth how soul packs worked if one of the soul pack died. How much it would affect the others as well as what would happen if he as the leader died. Sure he spent
hours of his off time while employed by SHIELD, reading and studying the mechanics of a soul pack. When he had traveled to New York, he visited Wong and received assignments and new reading materials to hunker down to and understand. When he conferred with Wong, they went over the finer details. Again and again, Wong warned him that his pack was scattered and that there would be consequences if he didn’t take things in hand. Their debates and arguments centered on this overarching theme. His stand had always been how could he force people to live a life around the pack? Steve refused to ask people to put aside their wishes and aspirations to follow him on some metaphysical pack. It made no sense to him. In the end, Steve’s ill preparedness fell on his own shoulders. What would happened if one of them died, if he died still hung over his head. Yet, even now he avoided that information and instead used the phone to search for something else entirely. He input Beloved into the search engine and the hits came up – few but enough to help Steve figure out what the hell it meant.

Beloved – a term for the rarest bonding of the soul pack. Most soul packs have specific characters or roles: Leader, sentinel, friend, confidant, guide, lover (beloved). Soul packs are ever evolving and could take up to five years to form. Soul packs are not based on any blood bond (genetic or otherwise) or sexual bond.

A lot of this was a repeat of what he’d read before. He hoped the site offered more in-depth knowledge on Beloved specifically. Wong repeatedly told him to use the site as a guide but not as the final word. What that meant, Steve never truly received a clear reply.

Some philosophers and Eastern scientists have posited that the Beloved pairing is the rarest because of the character of the astral projection. During pairing or bonding, astral projections become synchronized.

An example of two sine waves with ebbs and crests matching was given as a figure. Steve knew a little about math, though geometry was never his strong suit. He scrolled past the figure and continued to read.

For a Beloved pairing it has been noted that when the astral projections first contact it is often rejected. There is no bond.

Steve laid his head back on the pile of pillows. Why hadn’t anyone told him about that? Why hadn’t he even considered it himself? It was exactly what happened when Tony attempted to force the bond – of course, Steve had thought it was due to the fact Tony and Steve were always adversaries. They were on the same side but always beating at each other. Their bond was not a given. But apparently it was.

Theories about the Beloved soul bond include the idea that neither astral projection is complete without the other. So that the first time the waves interact, the pairing cancels the other out. Normal pairings are additive. In non-pairing couplets the astral projections do not acknowledge the existence of the other. In the Beloved first encounter, the pairing is subtractive. There are theories that the first encounter aligns the astral projections to allow for connection and bonding during the second encounter. When the pairing for Beloved actually occurs, both astral projections’ waves are changed. Frequencies and amplitudes are affected.

Well, all of that explained exactly what had happened and why in mythical, or scientific or whatever terms but what it meant remained a mystery. There were only three extensively studied Beloved bonds in all of the soul packs documented. In all cases the bonded were in love and sexually involved.

Steve dropped the phone as the shame heated his face. All those nights he pretended to – he dreamed of Tony. It was okay, he’d told himself. It was just a silly fantasy, something to get the frustration
out, something to ease the tensions. He’d fooled himself all along. He blinked away the tears as he
stared up at the ceiling. Perverted, deviant. That’s what they called it back in his day when he grew
up. It was his normal. He’d go to prison. Ridiculed. They wouldn’t do that today, but that didn’t
mean it was right. But was it wrong? His brain ached in a confused mess. The pain in his head
mirrored the ache in his gut. His eyes stung with unshed tears and he pushed himself to go through
the Soul Mantra several times to quiet the erratic harmonies emanating from him to the others in the
pack.

He picked up the phone and scrolled through the site until he got to a section on love and the soul
bond. Most soul packs were close, closer than families. His soul pack stayed dispersed and jumbled.
Maybe that was part of the problem. Wong was right. Of course the sorcerer was right. Steve had
been playing with fire for two long years.

The position of lover is different than Beloved. Lover can be casual or serious. Beloved is lifelong
and is than sex. It is a true bonding. Some Eastern philosophies believe it is the one true bond. The
soul is split into two different beings.

That couldn’t be right, but Steve left the phone on his lap as he weighed what had happened. It might
have been a fluke. It could go away. He knew he was only fooling himself. The truth was he could
feel the new vibrations from both Bucky and Tony. While Bucky’s sounded like one of those electric
guitars being tuned, Tony’s – Tony’s glided along in a whisper and soared like a bird on wings. He
enjoyed the feel of it, the tenderness but also the power.

Steve snapped out of it. Putting the phone on the tray table, he closed his eyes. One thing at a time.
He needed to think things through, and he needed to talk to Tony.

But it happened that Tony did not come to visit him the entire time he was in the hospital. When the
days went by and Tony never showed up, Steve ignored the ache in his chest and the conflict he
received from his new bond with Tony as if the threads already frayed and burnt on the ends. He
wanted to ask for Tony, but that kid from Brooklyn, the one that was only ninety something pounds
of spit and vinegar lived underneath all the muscles and bravado. Steve’s abilities never helped him
to muster the courage to talk to people, especially not in situations like the one he happened to be in.
He thought about reaching out along the tendrils of the bond, to feel and to search. He wanted to
discuss how they were going to deal with the bond, but then Steve realized that maybe Tony just
didn’t want to be in the position either. Maybe Tony felt or heard or whatever Steve’s thoughts about
the bond and had been insulted by it. That thought shamed Steve, and so he curled back and tried to
keep as much distance from Tony as possible in light of their new uncomfortable situation.

When he checked out of the hospital it was with Bruce, Natasha, and Sam at his side along with
Clint who never even once asked to be part of the pack. Steve respected him for that and wished he
wanted to welcome another member, but with Bucky and Tony still outstanding, Steve needed to
focus on the next steps.

The next steps were Bucky. Natasha dug up old contacts from Russia and got a dossier on Bucky.
She told him not to pull on that thread and then took off for a few weeks of R and R. He understood
that she needed time to process, that she had to figure out who she really was. Hell, in some ways, he
felt the same. When Natasha left a part of his soul mourned but he knew she would be back,
eventually. Bruce hung around to ensure that Steve had healed completely before he begged off to
go back to New York. Steve wanted to ask about Tony; he knew the Bruce and Tony were close.
though he never summoned up the courage.

Sam stayed. Like a guardian, Sam remained stalwart next to Steve. It helped him suffer the blow of
Natasha departing. Change always felt like little deaths. Sam’s presence also helped Steve move
through the hurt that Tony would be interacting with Bruce but not him.

In the afternoon, two weeks after he’d gotten home from the hospital and said good bye to both Natasha and Fury, Steve sat in his apartment with the dossier spread out before him and Sam sitting at his laptop reviewing the evidence.

“I don’t know, Steve. It looks pretty damning.”

“He was a tool of Hydra. According to this file Zola, under Operation Paperclip, continued what he started with Bucky in ’43. Only it was worse, so much worse. They brainwashed him.” Steve flipped through the papers to show Sam. It was probably the thousandth time that Steve had shown the same four sheets of paper as evidence to Sam of Bucky’s innocence. “You can’t blame a person if their consent is taken away. That’s basic Helsinki.”

“Since when did you get so up on the Helsinki findings?” Sam asked as he sat back in the chair next to the desk. Most of Steve’s belongings were packed up again. He needed to get out of DC. It wasn’t the best place for him. The media swarmed around him constantly. The different outlets spent time at his apartment and at Sam’s. Steve was afraid that Sam would follow him and move simply to get away from the hounds.

Steve got up. “You want some coffee?” Sam agreed to the cup of joe. As Steve made the brew, he answered, “You know I liberated a few concentration camps during World War II. I will never forget them. It still haunts me.”

“Yeah, I kind of know that one,” Sam said and scratched at the back of his neck.

“Sorry. You got the dreams, too?” Steve said as he finished pouring the coffee and then set the milk carton on the table with the sugar bowl.

“A little. You have vivid dreams.”

“God, I hope not,” Steve muttered. He truly hoped Sam or anyone else in the pack weren’t privy to all of his dreams. He placed a plate of cookies on the table. Sam snatched one right away and drove for the coffee like an addict.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s like the dreams of your past, the ones bound by memory. Those are the ones shared. I read up on the dreaming stuff because Lord, help me I do not want Natasha to know some of the dreams I’ve had. I don’t know why it’s the memory ones but it might have to do with how grounded they are.” He chewed and then added, “You know, I think you’re going to have to do something about your pack.”

Steve settled back in the chair at his kitchen table. He spread out the papers again and his writing tablet. “Well you are not the first to tell me that, but I don’t know Sam. Everyone’s happy.” That – right there, he told himself was the overstatement of the century.

“You’re joking, right?” Sam shook his head. “Steve, you’re pack is falling apart. I’m new to this stuff and you can’t tell me that you of all people see what’s going on as a good strategy?”

Steve only side eyed Sam. “I’m not certain I like the idea of having people change their lives for me. Look at what’s happened so far.” He could go into all that had gone wrong, but the rawness left him empty.

“The pack strengthens everyone in it,” Sam said. “Without trying to do this, Steve, you’ve abandoned a great resource.”
Steve gulped back his words. Did it? Natasha left; he knew she was okay, but the bond that linked them together felt worn, tired, and lost. She’d gone back home to Russia the last Steve heard. What she found there couldn’t have been settling at all, or relaxing. It must have been disturbing, because she was drifting around Russia now with no purpose. Sometimes when he was chanting his Mantra and he reached out - all he felt from her was a low and steady weeping.

He bowed his head. “I’m not so certain it’s as great a resource as we thought. It feels like an invasion sometimes.” He wondered if that also played into the fact that Tony never appeared at the hospital. The distance stretched the bond between them and now the rest of the pack teetered. The truth hurt. The soul pack wasn’t going away any time soon. He conceded Sam was right; he needed to do something about it.

Sam shrugged. “Gotta get over that. You think I’m not a little freaked out about it? I am.” Sam drank some coffee, rested his gaze on Steve, and then added, “But if we’re going to do this – find Barnes, deal with it. Deal with what he did. Well, the pack might help. I think it will help. You gotta look at the big picture.”

“I don’t think I can ask people that,” Steve said. “It’s worked so far, the way I’ve dealt with it.” A sad excuse, that’s what Steve thought, but didn’t voice.

“But what about the rest?” Sam said. “We went into the fight of our lives without Bruce. Bruce, the big guy. He shouldn’t have stayed on the sidelines. We can communicate through the bond, maybe not direct thoughts, but enough that it would have helped to find you. It’s time, Steve.”

He knew it. He was leaving for New York, but he still hadn’t broached the idea to Sam about pulling up his roots and going to New York, too. Hell, Sam had family in Prince George’s county in Maryland.

“I don’t know.” He sat back, tossing the pencil he held onto the table. The afternoon light dappled the table but he felt like he was still in the shadows. “For the longest time since I woke up it’s been about trying to catch up. The soul pack has been just another complication. I want everyone to be together. But it’s a hard sacrifice to make.” He turned his wrist over and stared at the lines covering it, his forearm and the long thread up to his chest. “I guess maybe I thought the serum would make it go away.”

“You could start thinking about it as a gift rather than a sentence,” Sam said. “Have you even talked to Stark?”

Steve frowned. “Not a word.”

“He’s got the armor back. He’s building again. Everyone knows that now. He came for you in the armor.” Sam gestured to the boxes strewn across the living room. “Where are you going?”

The urge to leave, to roam, to go and find something - someone heightened with every passing day. “New York. I need to touch base with the pack. Then I have to find out where I’m going to land.”

“You have to work this with the entire pack, you can’t keep this up.” Sam stared at the boxes. “So you moving now or later.”

“Later when I get a sense of where-.” He stopped. He already knew where. The scratching ache in his chest wasn’t going to disappear unless he did something about it.

Sam considered him. “It’s the soul pack,” Sam said. “If you keep going like this, you’re never going to find your roots.”
Steve picked up the papers of the file on Bucky again as he sat forward. He tossed them across the table. “And what about that? I’m ready to start putting it together, but Bucky’s part of the pack and what do I tell Stark? Does Tony really need to know that someone in our soul pack killed his parents?”

Sam lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Dude, he’s gotta know sometime. The Winter Soldier is part of our pack, his pack. He’s Brother, right?”

Steve nodded. While Steve missed Natasha’s words of wisdom, he needed some right now. As Companion, Sam could step into almost every other role (except for Beloved according to his reading). Steve touched the soul bond between them, seeking and asking for more. He folded his hands and asked. “So what does that mean to you? That Bucky is Brother?”

Sam pressed his lips into a tight line before finally saying, “I’m not sure. All I get is noise from him. He’s very confused. Maybe if the pack was all together we could help him out.”

Steve pointed to Sam. “But to you. You what does it mean to be linked to someone with Bucky’s past?”

Again, Sam eyed him as if he studied a complex problem, and it was in many ways. He tilted his head and frowned. “I suppose it would be hard. I mean, I’ve tried to live my life with integrity and pride. Being from the opposite side of the fence.” He put his hand up to stop Steve from interrupting. “Being Black in America isn’t easy. You’re always fighting for respect and the hard truth is even now Black people are not equal. Every thing we encounter in the US is simply made against us. Now, I’m not saying anything of what I’ve experienced throughout the years is similar to Bucky, but he’s going to have a lot of people look at him and think one thing – he’s a killer.” Sam shrugged. “I walk down the street, white women avoid me, hold their purses closer to their bodies. It’s the way of our world. Bucky – well, he’s going to come into this pack with a burden on his back. You, me, all of us are going to have to be there for him.”

“And Stark?” Steve asked.

“Well, first it might be nice if you started by calling him Tony,” Sam said as he folded his hands in his lap. “Second, gotta give him time. He has to come to realize that Bucky is not defined by some image. He’s a separate individual and should be accepted on his own merits.”

Steve hadn’t considered that avenue. “Maybe, but Tony… Tony could never forgive him.”

“I don’t know. You’re not even giving him the chance.”

Steve bobbed his head. “I get your point. I do. But Stark, Tony, doesn’t trust me. Hell, he doesn’t even like me.”

“Well, the universe and your astral projections think differently,” Sam said. “Maybe, maybe you should go check out places in New York to live and visit with him. Then maybe we could think about what it means to be a soul pack.”

Steve grabbed the pencil again and tapped it against the edge of the table. His nerves ratcheted up when he thought about talking to Tony. “I could try.”

“That’s all we’re asking for,” Sam said and smiled.

Too tired to face the rest of the crimes that Hydra brainwashed Bucky into performing for them,
Steve cleaned up the files and tucked them away in one of the packing boxes. Sam said his goodbyes and told Steve to think about the move as an imperative. If Steve moved to New York, he’d have to leave Sam and that didn’t sit right either. Sam gave him clear signs that the pack took priority. The logical conclusion then would be that Sam was open to the idea of moving as well. Thinking about having the pack together warmed Steve, while at the same time heaping on more anxiety. Yet the more he thought about utilizing the pack, truly accepting it, his feelings began to turn around and his fears settled. They flaked away as if he brushed off the old paint to reveal a beautiful masterpiece underneath. Linking was one thing, but bringing people into your heart like his mother said was another thing entirely. It changed everything.

It brought back memories of the Howling Commandoes. Of his life before and how it faded farther and farther away every day. Though to this day, he still felt weak and small and alone. Taking Sam’s advice on several levels, Steve decided it was time to face Tony. It had been weeks since the fall of SHIELD. They hadn’t seen one another. All he felt through the bond had been a vibrant nervousness that only set him on edge when he concentrated on it. While he was in New York he decided it would be best to visit Wong again. Denying the soul pack when it was growing so much now was fool’s play. He admitted that Sam knew what he was talking about – Steve was playing with fire. He couldn’t do that to other people. He needed to get everyone’s buy in, but especially Tony’s in more ways than one.

When he planned to go to New York, he called Sam to tell him and said he would check in once he got to the city. In an off handed remark, Sam mentioned the idea of talking to the VA about getting a job transfer to New York. Just those few words eased Steve’s concerned. He packed up a duffle, stuffed the Hydra files in the bottom of it, and then opened his door to leave only to find Clint in civilian clothes standing there, waiting.

“Clint?”

“Got it in one,” Clint said. “You ready to go?”

“Hmm, why are you here?” Steve said as he peered down the hallway and adjusted the straps of his bag that hung on his back.

“Well, a certain director who is very clearly dead and does not communicate from the grave asked me to escort you to where ever, since Hydra cells are still out to get you,” Clint said and glanced around Steve’s apartment. “You did get th-.”

“Bugs have been out for a while, yes.” Fury was – well – infuriating sometimes. “I don’t really need a babysitter.”

Clint tilted his head in acceptance of Steve gripe. “I get that. Let’s just go together, shall we?”

“That’s not very subtle.” Steve pulled the door to close it as he stepped out of his apartment.

“It wasn’t meant to be,” Clint said. At least he didn’t have his bow and quiver obviously strapped on to his back. “Are we ready? Where are we going? What time’s the flight?”

Steve chuckled. “No flight. I’m taking the train. To New York.”

“The train,” Clint said and grimaced. “You are old fashioned.”

Steve started to jog down the stairs. “No, I just like to avoid the congestion of the airport.”

Clint followed behind him. “And your shield is a pain to check, right?”
Steve looked over his shoulder, the curve of the covered shield partially blocking his view. “What gave me away?”

They exited the building and headed toward the nearest metro. Steve glanced at Clint. “You have any luggage?”

“Not really. I’m taking a flight home tonight,” Clint said and that only brought up the fascinating subject of where home was for Clint. It wasn’t like Steve ever really spent much time with the archer. Except for the Battle of New York and a few meetings following the victory, Clint had been absent. Natasha only told Steve that Clint had been undergoing long term treatment for PTSD and traumatic brain injury due to the after effects of Loki’s mind control. Steve left it at that – Clint’s business and his health was his own. Steve never liked people butting into his illnesses when he was young, so he refused to do it now.

“Okay, well, we have enough time to get to Union Station and take the train up to New York.”

Steve found Clint to be an amicable travel companion, though a quiet one. He studied the crowd and remained on alert at all times. The idea that he needed a security guard was more than just outside the realm of ridiculous; it was ludicrous. He kept it to himself, though. After two years Steve hadn’t seen Clint on the active duty roster for SHIELD. That meant a lot. If this was Fury’s way to ease Clint back into the game, Steve could handle it. Plus it would give him time to get some shut eye. Being part of the pack actually toyed with his sleep habits because he discovered that he needed to astrally check in with each of his pack members before sleep. Most of the time a simple brush of consciousness worked. Other times the bond mate settled close to Steve’s soul energy for solace. He didn’t know if the other member was consciously aware of doing it, but he offered it all the time now.

A quick nap on the train to New York would do him good. They paid for their tickets and loaded up in the quiet car. Clint waited for Steve to pick a seat. Steve took the window seat, ready to cozy up against the side of the train car and doze for the ride. Clint scanned the compartment and when satisfied, sat down. He didn’t pull out his phone or a book or anything. He just stayed focused.

Steve quirked a brow at him. “You do know who I am, right?”

“Oh!” Clint said in mock surprise. “Are you Iron Man?”

“Funny, you’re hilarious,” Steve returned. “You can get out a book or a newspaper or something.”

“A newspaper,” Clint said with a smile. “You’re cute.”

“Very funny.” He tugged off his jacket. His bag and concealed shield were tucked up in the overhead storage. Folding his jacket, he stuffed it against the side of the train car and leaned against it, getting comfortable. “While you sit there and get your act ready for vaudeville, I’m taking a nap.”

“And it just keeps coming,” Clint muttered.

Steve smiled and closed his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long he slept – probably less than an hour, but he blinked awake to find Clint sipping water but still on high alert. Steve sat up and asked, “Any more of that water?”

Clint nodded and reached down to get his bag. He tossed Steve a bottle. Catching it, Steve twisted the cap open and drank. When he finished, he capped the bottle and asked, “So you’ve taken to working for clandestine bosses who may or may not be dead?”

“Gotta put food on the table somehow,” Clint replied with a shrug.
“Interesting,” Steve said. He never was a good profiler, but he believed in people and had faith in them. “And where does one clandestine boss who may or may not be dead get the funds?”

“You really have to ask, Captain?” Clint said and then sat back into the seat. “He might not always be the most kosher, but he’s done things – good things – for me.”

“There’s loyalty, Clint, and then there’s- well a little too much?” Steve said.

“You have your family.” Clint tapped Steve’s wrist with the bottom of his own water bottle. “You’d do anything to protect it, right?”

Steve clamped his mouth shut. Clint was inferring, not telling. He only nodded in response.

“Well, then you get it.”

As explanations went that one left a lot to be desired. “Okay.”

Clint ran a hand through his short hair. “You’re the only one, outside of Nat, who trusted me. After Loki, after everything. You invited me to fight during the Battle of New York.” Clint blanched a little, his face visibly going pale. “You trusted me and that means a lot. It took a long time for me to trust – well for me to trust me again.”

“It wasn’t you,” Steve said but knew those words rang hollow. But his thoughts reached out to Bucky, to one of his pack whom he called Brother. Bucky had been tormented, tortured, and turned into a lethal weapon. He was an assassin of legend. Bucky had been a victim as well. “It might not sound like I understand, but I do. You’re not responsible for what happened under mind control.”

Clint leaned in, whispering quietly in the nearly empty train car. “I know. I understand that. I went through two years of shrinks getting in my head to tell me that. But then I find out the shrinks were Hydra. Shit, I don’t know what to think. I don’t know who to trust. I can trust my boss because he did something for me that no one else did. I can trust Nat, because she ensured it.”

“Can you trust me?” Steve asked.

Clint half grinned. “If you can’t trust Captain America, who can you trust?”

Steve hung his head and sat forward a little, gripping his water bottle with both hands. “Everyone should have a litmus test, Clint. Captain America doesn’t get a pass. The symbol is one thing. The person is another.”

“I get that, but I do – I trust you, Steve.”

Steve smiled and then offered his hand. “I can give you protection. We can give you protection. One of the reasons I’m going to New York is to bring the team and the soul pack together.” For the first time since he set out, he accepted it as truth. “I can’t promise you the soul pack will bond with you. I can’t. But I sure as hell want you on my team. If we do bond, I can tell you that I am dedicated to the pack. I want it to work. It’s a safe place to land, outside of SHIELD. And I can assure you it isn’t Hydra.”

Clint glared at his open hand as if he might set it on fire with his stare, but after a long moment of evaluation and study, he accepted the offer and clapped Steve’s hand. The soul bond opened as Steve felt his astral projection harmonize with Clint’s soul, but at that moment a loud horrible squeal raked the air. The train juddered, causing them to lurch forward, and their hands broke apart as the soul bond screeched between them. Clint collapsed as the sound of metal protesting and twisting screamed through the air. People let out cries of surprise and the train jerked. Steve braced himself as
the train continued its harrowing journey, half on and half off the tracks.

Against the motion of the crazed train, Steve forced his way over to Clint who lie in the middle of the aisle. Steve touched his neck, finding a strong pulse, but he was out. People throughout the car started to try and stand, to find out what was happening. Steve managed to stand up and in his best Captain America voice said, “Sit, strap in, and stay safe!” The train pitched again, throwing him across the car. He smacked up against the window, hitting his head against the opposite chair. The whole of the train trembled, shaking as if undergoing a seizure, and then stopped dead. It took all of thirty seconds for the train derailment to occur.

Righting himself, Steve sat up and touched his brow where blood leaked in a steady drip. He went to stand up and found several of his riding companions still in shock. He supposed that was for the best. Scanning his surroundings, Steve located Clint curled up against the front of the car but still unconscious. Steve felt the throb of the severed soul bond. Not severed really, but incomplete. The soul bond hadn’t the time to weave together before the train derailed and Steve had been thrown apart from Clint. It only takes a few seconds, but it was a fragile time. He needed to get Clint to Wong immediately. People around him were sobbing, but for the most part in stable condition. No one looked like they’d been seriously injured from Steve’s quick review of the few people in the car.

Luggage and bags were scattered all over the car from the breached overhead compartments. He found his bag and shield – it was across the car. Wrestling his way to it and to Clint, he stopped periodically to check on the other passengers. As he made his way to his shield and his teammate a rattle halted him. He froze. The car shook and he grabbed the seat. Other passengers groaned along with the car. Steve peered out of the windows and saw no immediate danger. Outside of the car a young woman with chestnut red hair stood with her hands reaching toward the train. Between her outstretched hands a crimson fire grew.

With a quick look to Clint, Steve went to reach for his bag containing his shield. But he was too late. Something knocked him over and he fumbled, staggering to the floor of the car. A young man with bleach white hair stopped, saluted him, and then knocked the bag out of his hands. In milliseconds the man disappeared in a blur. Dumbfounded, Steve stood for a moment and tried to parse what the hell just happened. But he never had the time for that because the young woman shot red flames at the train even as Steve looked out the windows again trying to get a glimpse of the young man.

The scarlet flames engulfed the train as the other passengers sobbed for help. He raced to retrieve his shield yet never got there. The side of the train, the actual metal of it, peeled back, screeching as it did. The flares of red energy licked at the sides and then pierced it, opening it like a tin can. Steve grabbed at his bag, but before he could free his shield the searing red energy reached out, away from the metal and, instead, wound around him. It neither burned nor froze, yet every nerve of his body protested, screamed in agony. His core, his soul came alive bright with white blinding light. He couldn’t control it.

His soul burst out like a beacon, a signal for help as his body was lifted out of the train wreck and into the terribly blue and perfect sky. The energy enveloping him paralyzed any movement as he grit his teeth and his arms splayed out. He tried to focus on the young woman, but the crimson light surrounding him closed him off. He tried to bring his arms down and to his sides but she held him.

Imprisoned above the train wreckage, he saw the light of the city not far off and the emergency vehicles approaching the accident site. But it wasn’t an accident, far from it. Standing next to the young woman and man, an older man stood. He grinned and said, “So much for nullifying Hydra.” To the young woman he said, “Kill him.”

Her energy cycloned around him, swirling with ever increasing intensity. It devoured pieces of him,
his life energy dissipating through the burning misery. Even as it jabbed and seared, he felt his soul respond. His astral projection searched and then mirrored her energy. As they synchronized, the despondency and hopelessness of the young woman came through and he knew her, understood her. Her and her brother.

“Family,” he uttered and the bond snapped into place. She nearly lost hold of him as she stumbled, but it wouldn’t have mattered anyhow. Metal arms encompassed him, tearing him away from the red flames, and then an army of iron men walled him off from her. With barely enough energy to keep his eyes open, Steve murmured, “Clint.”

“Don’t worry. We already have him,” Iron Man said in his ear. “Legion, take her and her friend.”

“No!” Steve tried to stop them but his energy was spent and he collapsed into Iron Man’s arms.

“I have you,” Tony said and then they flew.

Steve wasn’t sure if he passed out from whatever the young woman had done or if the flight caused some loss of time, but the next thing he knew Iron Man stood over him and he was lying in a large bed. He jerked up and looked around, confused.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s okay. We got Clint out of the wreck. He’s stable but not awake. Bruce is with him right now. No casualties which is a fucking miracle.” Iron Man disengaged the helmet to reveal his face. Tony looked genuinely worried about him. “Are you okay? You were out of it by the time we got here.”

Steve sat up and slipped his legs over the side of the bed. His head felt like someone knocked it with rocks a few times. “How long?”

“Just a few minutes. Lucky you were right outside the city. It took me no time to get there once the call went out.” Tony must have signaled the armor to open because he stepped out of it and stood close but not close enough to touch.

“And Clint is okay?” Steve asked again. He felt like he wasn’t processing.

“We don’t know yet. Bruce is assessing his status. He’s down in the med-bay.” Tony thumbed it over his shoulder. “There’s nothing you can do right now. Clint is unconscious.”

“Med-bay?” Steve turned around and looked over his shoulder at the windows. They were hazed to dark and he couldn’t see outside of them. “Where are we?”

“JARVIS, clear the windows.”

The windows became startlingly clear. The light streaming in from the city and glinting off of the skyscrapers nearly blinded him. Steve rubbed at his eyes and said, “Wow, the Tower?”

“Yeah, the big ugly building in New York,” Tony said. “We have everything we need here, by the way. Even coffee. You want some?”

“Where are they?” Steve said as he nodded. He got to his feet and thought the room might do a loop but it stayed surprisingly still.

“I just said, they’re in the med-bay.” Tony led him out of the bedroom, through a long hallway passing what Steve could only surmise might be other bedrooms to a large living area that opened to the kitchen.
“No, the girl and her brother.”

“The Hydra agents?” Tony shook his head. “They got away. The Iron Legion is after them, but I think we have a little more of a problem. Way more of a problem actually.”

Steve sat down at the island when Tony pointed to the stool. Steve needed to get to Clint, but when he stretched out his soul’s energy just a buzz returned from him. He couldn’t manage to lock onto it and he surmised he needed Wong and for Clint to wake up for him to actually do anything. Would Clint wake up? Steve inwardly cursed, they needed Wong.

Tony went to make the coffee in one of those single cup makers. Steve thought they were extremely wasteful. Tony popped in a cup and started it. He turned and folded his arms as he leaned against the counter.

“I should get to Clint” He needed to focus on the critical issues. Steve knew he wasn’t that confused and scrambled from the event. His head might burst but he could follow simple information.

“Okay, let’s take this step by step.” Tony went to the fridge and pulled out a carton of milk. “You were on a train with Clint. It got ambushed by witchy girl and her speedy brother from what we’re hearing over the news reports. Clint isn’t awake. Bruce said he’s stable right now, resting. I did not answer the emergency call, but I did answer you. Because you’re the one who called me. And my newly made Iron Legion, robots driven by JARVIS to do my commands. Cool, right. Not as cool as the trick you pulled by calling me. In fact, you called everyone. I’m sure that Romanoff is on her way here too. Luckily, Bruce stayed put here at the Tower. Hulk almost made an appearance.”

“Oh,” Steve said and squinted. “Oh.” The implications reached farther and wider than Steve could fathom. “I didn’t know I could do that.”

“Neither did I,” Tony said. “And if I hadn’t answered, I’m not sure what the hell or how the hell I would have felt. But let me tell you the call was immediate and urgent.”

“Oh,” Steve said. He accepted the mug of coffee with a thank you and gulped it, not even waiting to put in some sugar. “That means- everyone? Everyone got the call?”

“As far as I can tell. Don’t worry; the nurses at Aunt Peggy’s house were able to get her to settle down-.”

Steve jumped up from the stool and raked his hands through his hair. “No, no. I’m not worried about Peggy. She’s – I know she’ll be okay. A lot of people are there to care for her including her children. But – no. This – this will not end well.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony said. Steve needed to get the nervous energy out, the horrible, festering energy. He paced to the beautiful, dark, marble fireplace and then back to the kitchen. “Rogers. Steve! What is going on?”

“We have a problem, a big one,” Steve said. “We have to get back to the site of the crash. Now, immediately.”

“Why? What’s going on?” From what Tony said it hadn’t been that long, they could still salvage the situation. “Steve? Stop pacing and tell me what’s going on?

“Bucky. Bucky is going to be there.”

Chapter End Notes
I am a little behind in revising and I also have to write my Cap-IM RBB, so I might be a little late posting for the upcoming chapters as I try and get more completed on my RBB. All is well though with this story it's over 100k completed. So I do hope you enjoy it!! <3
Consequences

Chapter Summary

A confrontation might tear Tony and Steve apart, forever.

Chapter Notes

After my beta read the chapter, I decided I didn't like how it went so I went through and rewrote a massive section of this chapter. It hasn't been read for issues, so there might be some typos and things like that - so I apologize! Hope you like it!

Thank you - all of you for such a great reception on this story. If you haven't noticed, because of your interest and some of your comments, I have decided to add a few chapters - though I was mostly done with the story. I decided it needed the depth and resolution that the readers would demand! So you get a few more chapters!

Walking out of the hospital weeks ago might have been the hardest thing Tony had ever done. Staying away ranked up there as the second hardest. Throughout the weeks after the fall of the Triskelion and the exposure of SHIELD as a Hydra society, Tony battled and debated with himself about the merits of being part of the soul pack. He tried to keep it rational, logical and devoid of emotions, but Tony admitted that the latter was just impossible for him. Even at a distance he heard the rattling of the soul pack. From the wisp of Natasha as she said farewell and seemed to close herself off, to Bruce fighting on a daily basis to stay sane, to Sam balancing his life and duty with his own hopes and dreams and finally to the ache of Steve as he worked to deal with a sense of abandonment again. Tony refused to take that as an indictment of his actions. Steve shouldn’t feel alone – he had Sam and Peggy. Natasha seemed to feel a long way away so maybe that was a little painful, but Tony – as his Beloved- really meant nothing. Hell, they didn’t even know each other after two years of Steve being awake.

God forbid he want some time to process. Before she left, Natasha called and in no uncertain terms told him that he was acting like the ass that he was. Bruce spent most of the early part of the weeks in DC and when he returned to New York City, he never queried Tony about his disappearance. Any time they spent together, Tony would catch Bruce throwing a quizzical look at him. That was probably due to the mixed-up shit from his brain Tony fed him on the daily basis. Tony did not know what to do, how to deal with the soul bond. For Christ’s sake, he wanted to be part of the bond, part of the pack, but he hated the idea that he was Beloved. Like he deserved so much more than an insignificant role – the love of the leader. What the hell? He deserved better. He deserved a role like a chief or futurist. He was a genius after all, the pack should need him in that role, not as the Beloved. The more he learned about the position of Beloved (and boy did he spend too much time studying it), the more the conflict grew in his head. According to the sources he’d consulted, his astral projection (what the fuck) was literally a part of Steve’s astral projection and vice versa. Their souls combined formed a whole and parted? He stopped himself because it only brought him back to the sense of isolation and abandonment Steve felt on a daily basis. Tony spent years ignoring that
part of himself. How alone he was as a child, how isolated he felt as an adult. He told himself that all
of points were the reasons he ran and he spat them out at Bruce one day when the man happened to
give him one of those squirrely looks.

“What?” Tony had snapped. “You think I ran because I’m selfish? I ran because of the crap role he
gave me in the pack. I’m not there to protect, or to offer guidance. I’m there for a good fuck. And
here’s the thing: he’s not gay. Or at least doesn’t confess to being gay.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Bruce muttered, then he added, “That’s not what I understand as the role of
Beloved.”

“Well, you understand wrong,” Tony said and pressed fingers to his temples. “I wanted to be part of
this – for some God forsaken reason that I can’t seem to recall now. But this is not what I wanted. I
didn’t want all this noise in my head and I sure as hell didn’t want to be his Beloved.”

“Did you consider this might be as hard or harder for him?” Bruce said and sat back from his bowl of
soup. They’d been eating lunch on the observation deck of the Tower. Tony had a cheeseburger and
fries – Bruce always got soup like he was some kind of granny or something. “One minute he’s
fighting Nazis in the 40s next he’s here fighting aliens. He spent the last few years catching up on
society. But also he had the lovely complication of a soul pack. Every time he came up here to visit
all he talked about was the pack and how he’d been neglecting it. He needs someone to help him,
and my understanding of the Beloved role is more significant than you’re making it out to be. From
what I understand he won’t be able to do this without you. Other packs that don’t have Beloved
roles, well, are composed of different personalities and souls. Our pack – we are dependent on both
of you.”

That had to be the most Tony ever heard Bruce speak outside of talking about particle physics or
Hulk related biology. Tony hung his head and sighed. “I’m not what he thinks I am.”

“Well, the universe thinks differently.”

“The universe is wrong,” Tony said. “And Christ, I could do without the constant headache from this
crap.”

“You’re not maintaining your Mantra and transference disciplines well. You need to keep that up.”
He took to slurping his soup again.

“These weird ass vibes from the soul pack are the problem. And who is the other one. You know,
the one that gives only like broken chords through the bond?” Tony asked as he pushed his lunch
away.

Bruce only shook his head. He knew. Tony could tell that much, but he clammed up immediately.

“Some Healer you are.”

“I’m not here to change your designation. I can only help you Tony with the maintenance of the
Mantra and the transference. If you don’t want my help, don’t attack me.” A shift of green colored
his eyes before he stood up to leave.

“Well, this whole soul pack thing didn’t go the way I planned,” Tony said trying to mend fences.
As he left the observation deck, he caught Bruce say, “Maybe it did.”

And that only served to piss off Tony more. He did not want to be in some cherished special space.
He knew that he would just ruin it. His life was about protection. He had a lot to make up for and so
he didn’t want to be designated the delicate flower of the bunch. Tony Stark, a man who at one time could literally blow up the world several times over, was not the weeping willow of the bunch.

Except he knew that being Beloved bestowed nothing of the sort on him. Sure, Tony should have stayed at Steve’s bedside after the whole blowing up S.H.I.E.L.D thing, but he couldn’t. There was no way in hell that he could stand there and face the idea of being Steve Rogers’ Beloved. After he got back to New York, Tony spent hours reading about it, learning it. He even visited that weird doctor who liked to call himself the Sorcerer Supreme (and wasn’t that the most obnoxious moniker he’d ever heard in his life). Beloved rang with a special closeness that he ran from because of his inability to offer more of himself. Pepper had been right, he used the armor as a cocoon. He shoved the reality of what Beloved meant out of his brain and focused on how he defined himself.

Yet, it slipped into his thoughts uninvited – what would it mean to be Steve’s Beloved. For all time. The bond was unbreakable and thus, Tony would always have someone. Someone close, someone to turn to. The idea fascinated and thrilled and terrified all at once.

Tony hid away in his workshop and tried to pretend it didn’t matter to him at all. He felt the searching of Steve along the bonds, a slight prickle every night and every morning to check in and ensure he was okay. Most of the time he batted it away only to be left bereft of that minor touch. It had only been a few weeks. Steve would learn to leave him alone –eventually.

Until Steve called out.

This had been worse than the Triskelion. So much worse. The call ripped into his chest and anchored onto his heart as if it might actually tear it from his body. He dropped everything and called the suit to him. He never questioned – he just did. Finding Steve enveloped by some strange energy, tense and shivering, Tony did the only thing he knew. He helped. He rescued. It occurred to him at that instant that so far Steve had been the damsel in distress and not Tony as the Beloved. He flew Steve back to the Tower in New York City. And everything went to hell as soon as Steve came to his senses.

Just his fucking luck as soon as Tony got Steve in his Tower, showed him the apartment he could be living in, Steve brought up the old war pal, Bucky Barnes. Tony’s nerves bristled when Steve sidestepped their moments together to focus on Barnes. With Steve in his Tower, Tony suddenly needed some sort of equilibration with his pack, especially with Steve. Now, though, he wasn’t even going to get the time required to do that – not only did a psychic blast hit him today with such urgency and insistence that he had to drop everything and rush to Steve’s side, but some half-crazed Hydra henchman was going to block his way. Tony had said he needed time to process, to figure out what being part of this pack really meant to him, but the truth was when coming face to face with Steve, all of his conflicting emotions drained away. Steve – his presence, his very real blood and bone presence – moved Tony like a seismic shift. It almost felt drug like, the need, the want to be close to Steve overwhelmed all of his doubts. Yet, here Steve was pushing his old war buddy who also happened to be an evil traitor.

“Bucky?” Tony said. “You mean the Bucky who’s been identified as the legendary Winter Soldier in all those files you and Nat released on the web?”

“Yeah, and the one who also happens to be part of our pack,” Steve said. The anxiety seeped out of him, not only through his constant pacing but also the chords of his soul. It leaked through the waves and Tony wasn’t all that proficient yet to cut it off. “He’s Brother.” Steve pointed to a mark on his arm. “We have to go and get him. He’s probably confused, alone.” What Steve didn’t say remained as the proverbial elephant in the room – that the Winter Soldier was on the loose and now the soul pack was responsible for him.
So Tony laid it on the line. “Brother? He’s part of the pack? What the hell?” It pieced together now; the constant undercurrent of dissonance. One song amongst all the rest continued to be off chord, a mix of straining broken harmonies. “He’s the one in the background, right? The one that’s constantly throwing headaches my way?”

“I don’t think it’s personal. I don’t think he can help it. Think about it, he has no one to train him. No one to help him. It must be maddening!” Steve said and rubbed at his eyes before covering his face with his hands. “This is all my fault. I should have done something for the pack years ago. But I just couldn’t.” He stopped before he finished. When he dropped his hands and looked at him, all Tony could see was the redness and disillusionment as if everything in the future had failed Steve. It haunted Tony. Steve looked up at Tony expectantly, but what could Tony offer him?

He wanted to tell Steve that he was remembering a Bucky Barnes that no longer existed. Only the Winter Soldier existed, the hand of Hydra and an evil assassin. He swallowed those words. He couldn’t force Steve to see reality. Not with that look on his face, not with his soul reaching out, aching for help. “We have to call in help. This isn’t just us. This is the whole pack, the team,” Tony said. Maybe somehow Tony could salvage this fucked up pack. The streams of guilt flowing off of Steve might drown him first, though.

“Sam is still in DC. That leaves you, Bruce, and me.” Steve bit back words. Tony saw him weighing whether or not to say them out loud.

“What are you not saying?” Tony said and rounded the island. Steve stopped his endless pacing. “You know there’s more. That’s the feedback loop I’ve been getting.”

“Clint,” Steve said but even then Tony knew instinctively that Steve wasn’t revealing everything. Some other truth lie hidden in plain sight. “But Clint – I have to deal with Clint. I don’t even know how. I need to talk with Bruce.” The scattered thoughts rattled the link between them and it surprised Tony to see how off centered and a mess Captain America could be.

“Bruce is already handling Clint.” Tony approached him and Steve glanced around as if looking for an easy exit. “Who else? The feedback loop has been terrible since I plucked you out of the sky. I just figured it was because you were under attack, but it’s not. Is it?”

Steve put his hands in his back jeans’ pockets. He stepped backward toward the windows as if he might leap to freedom. “Tony, I don’t have a choice in these matters. Well, not all the time. Sometimes they just happen.”

“So who is it?” Tony studied Steve. His usual broad shoulders hunched down and his face looked unusually wan, tired, and stricken by the truth. Tony decided to try a different tactic, one that would be blessed by Sorcerer Supreme himself. “Come on, Steve, we’re all in the same pack here. You need to tell me. I can’t help you if you don’t own up to it.” He tried to push calming waves toward Steve, but working the souls felt awkward like he was attempting to dance a complicated routine when no one taught him the choreography. As a novice in the soul bonding knowledge, Tony had a lot to study yet. He really needed that Strange guy to help him out with some more with lessons. “Well?”

Steve chewed at his lip before bobbing his head silently agreeing with Tony. Who knew something like that would work. In the next seconds as Steve confessed, Tony only wanted to go back on his idea of using a more civilized plan. “The girl and her brother.”

“The girl and her brother?” Tony repeated. His brain slogged through the information. He felt like
there was mud up to his chest and he was trying to run. He scowled at Steve. “You’re going to have to give me more data than that.”

“The girl and her brother. The ones who attacked,” Steve said, licked his lips, and then finished. “The ones who attacked the train.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, you have got to be kidding me.” Tony threw his hands up. He couldn’t handle that. This soul pack was completely fucked up. “What the hell? Maybe under duress you get funky or something. You fucking bonded with criminals.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re not.-.” Steve said, but Tony wasn’t listening. It was his turn to race around the living room.

“You have fucked up. This is fucked up. And all you can think about is your boyfriend from the forties. Maybe you’re fucking Hydra and we’ve all been fooled.”

Steve marched right into Tony’s path and stood over him. “Don’t you even dare! I am not Hydra. Don’t you dare think that of me. And Bucky is not my boyfriend. I am not a pervert.”

“Ha!” Tony barked at Steve. “So you do think gay people are perverts. You are a homophobic dick. And what the fuck do you think of your Beloved being a guy? Because I’m all guy, Stevie-boy. And I am fully loaded.” He grabbed at his crotch. Steve staggered away, getting out of Tony’s personal space. Even if it was crude, it was worth the absolute horror and revulsion on Rogers’ face.

Steve looked away, his face lit by the sunrays dappling the living room through the window. The blush of embarrassment radiated. Tony could see the blue of his eyes and how he jaw twitched in anger. “Bucky is going to be there,” Steve said through clenched teeth. “You can come or not. But I’m going.”

He should have just let the homophobic bastard go and not worry about what would happen. But the feedback loop ate at his brain and he didn’t want to deal with it alone. Being closer to Steve actually calmed the pinging reverberations. They went back to the crash site. And found nothing.

No Bucky.

No girl and her brother.

Just the emergency crews, the media, and the police. Steve took his time talking to the police. He explained what happened and discussed some of their options. He never mentioned the soul pack or the fact that he linked the Avengers to terrorists. He only told the police that the girl and her brother were being mentally manipulated by Hydra and that they were not to be harmed. The police looked perplexed but they agreed to call the Avengers if the two were taken into custody.

“It’s all we can ask,” Steve said in his Captain America voice even though he was in civilian clothes. “Thank you, officer. Would you mind if I retrieved my luggage from the wreckage?”

“It’s usually evidence, but you can go and look. I think we have a pretty good idea of what happened here now,” the officer said.

Steve started picking his way through broken metal and debris. Tony as Iron Man followed him. He scanned the wreckage for any clues who his new pack mates might be. JARVIS collected the data. Steve spent time helping the clearing crews and lifting heavy objects for them. Tony suspected he only did it because he thought waiting around might lead to Bucky showing up.

Over the course of the afternoon, Tony scanned through the data and found nothing of any value.
What he did find interesting was the hacked surveillance video he had of said girl and her brother. “J
man, put all the images through face recognition. I want to know who they are and what they are
doing. How’d they get those powers? That kind of stuff.”

“Yes, sir.”

For a while Steve stood apart from the clearing crews and seemed to just go still. Tony watched him,
a few meters off. He saw nothing at all, but he felt the searching, the flung tendrils of hope stretching
beyond physical barriers and space. It thrilled Tony, caused gooseflesh to pop up as he let himself get
called up in Steve’s exploration. As he hunted, Steve also shared the Soul Mantra as if trying to

teach Bucky and the other new pack members. When Tony spied Steve, he saw his lips moving, but
no sound came out – just the chat of the Mantra over and over. Through the rivers of the Steve’s
soul, the ripples echoed back to him. Small, unsure, and faint as if the distance between them
widened and the gap grew in size. There was no hope they were going to appear but Steve had
somehow made a connection. Tony stayed silent, an observer to Steve’s ministrations with his astral
projection. He beckoned them come home, he asked Bucky to see him through the soul bonds. For a
brief and brilliant moment, the clarity of the connection brightened the bonds and Tony gasped at the
strength, but then the others – Bucky and the new mates snapped away, pulled back as if frightened
dog might pull away from its abusive master.

Steve stood there, panting with his hand on his chest and his head bowed. Tony crossed the distance
between them. Steve glanced up at him, his eyes only offered a remote haunted look that plagued
him earlier.

“Are you ready to go?” he said it quietly, respectful of Steve’s attempt and failure at connecting and

bringing Bucky in.

“I think,” Steve said. He picked up his bag and nodded.. Tony looked him up and down.

Even though Steve had taken a hired car out to the wreckage site, Tony decided to offer him a way
home. “Come on, I’ve give you a lift.” Tony pointed to his boot. “Step on the boot. There’s a hand
hold on the opposite shoulder. Grab it.”

Steve didn’t protest, just followed the directions. He kept hold of his bag and they took off for the
Tower. Talking really wasn’t an option, and the soul bond while it could be quite revealing never
truly offered clearly articulated thoughts. When they landed at the Tower, Steve stepped off and then
as the armor dismantled, he said, “Thank you, Tony. I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Wait.” Tony walked into his penthouse apartment as the armor disappeared into storage. Even

though, it still rankled that Steve had said Tony’s lifestyle was disgusting, Tony still felt a kind of
responsibility for him. Especially after the soul bond search. Should he broach the subject? Ask
Steve if he needed a hand? Something? Instead, Tony settled for something more comfortable. “You
can stay here, you know. Not here, here, but your own apartment. I have a whole floor for you.”

“What?” Steve crunched up his face like he smelled something bad.

“Seriously, that’s how you say thank you to someone who’s just offered you a place to live?” Tony
went to his bar and Steve tagged along. “So you’re just going to skedaddle – see I know oldie

grandpa talk, too. Forget about the pack, about your team, about those Hydra agents you invited to

invade everything that’s sacred.” He cringed. Why? Why was he baiting Steve?

Steve gripped his bag with white knuckles. His jaw worked like he was trying to chew through
leather. Finally he said, “I’d just like a little time to think through things. I didn’t realize you had a
place for me to stay. I apologize for that. But if you could tell me where I’ll go there now.”
Tony stared at him for a full minute, not knowing how to process just about everything. He should ask Steve to stay. What the man had been through today alone begged for companionship, a few beers, a heart to heart talk. Tony studied Steve. The tightness of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders warned him not to intrude. Sighing, Tony relented. Exhausted by the messy business that seemed to be his life right now, Tony waved at Steve. “Go. JARVIS will take you to your floor.” He didn’t watch as Steve went to the elevator, didn’t look up as the elevator opened and Steve entered it. He only glanced up as the doors closed and Steve was staring down at his feet in the car. Tony grabbed the bottle of Bourbon and poured himself two fingers.

He thought the Avengers Initiative was problematic. The soul pack – now that was a mess. And Steve as their leader – no. That just didn’t work especially the way that Steve obviously thought of Tony.

“A damned pervert,” Tony said. The moments after rescuing Steve today came back to mind. After everything that happened – the call blasting through his nerves like a spike to the heart, the crash, the rescue, the girl and her brother, everything. The beauty of Steve using the soul projection to try and locate Bucky. Tony longed to ask him how he did it, what it meant, could they all do something like that, but then his brain circled back to the same thing time and time again. After all of it, Tony could only focus on the fact that Steve thought of him as a pervert. It wouldn’t be the first time someone threw that insult his way, but it would be the only time that someone who named him Beloved happened to say it.

“Just my luck,” Tony whispered and slugged back the drink. It burned more than it should. He poured another but this time didn’t worry about measuring.

So he had a Beloved or a soul mate or whatever the hell it was and this soul mate found him repugnant. Let’s not even talk about the fact his soul mate brought into the pack a bunch of villains. How did that work exactly? The whole thing was giving him a headache. He drank the last of his tumbler of Bourbon with a quick cringe.

Eventually he ambled back to his bedroom and his mind drifted to the idea that Steve was now in his apartment a floor down. It was a strange balancing act, both hating Steve and being his Beloved. Part of Tony yearned to learn more, to be able to ask Steve to sit and talk about what happened today or any day. Yet, he couldn’t just forget that Steve saw him as something less. If one thing irritated and annoyed Tony more than anything else it happened to be the idea that someone would think lowly of him. And now, Steve slept in his Tower in the same apartment he’d woken up in just hours ago. He’d done this to himself – gotten his hopes up for no reason. Why? Why had he hoped?

Coming to terms with having a label and a position in a soul pack but not actually being accepted by the Steve, the fulcrum of the pack, drained away any of the hope he mustered. Tony recognized that in his own mind he flip flopped a lot regarding what he wanted from the soul pack but especially what he wanted from Steve. It would have helped a ton if Steve showed any outward signs of welcoming Tony. Sure, Tony felt the constant presence through the soul bonds, and the twice daily pings to ensure the pack members were safe, but nothing else grew from the seed of their soul binding. Yet standing at the crash site today and experiencing Steve reaching out, searching for his fellow pack mates changed Tony. It hurt to think he stood on the sidelines. He wanted more from this pack. He hungered for it, but how could he when the pack leader simply thought of him as disgusting?

Standing by Steve earlier in the day and feeling part of something grander, something beautiful, had taken Tony’s breath away. Who wanted to be around a soul mate that hated him? He shrugged as he dropped onto his bed. Steve probably didn’t even hate Tony. Steve probably just didn’t approve in his old grandpa kind of way, because Steve Rogers only hated Nazis.
Tony threw himself back on the bed and blinked away the feelings, those old feeling that always crept up and haunted him from his childhood days. He wanted to tell himself that Steve Rogers was just an old man wrapped up in a young man’s body. Old people couldn’t learn new ways. They were all trying to ruin everything for everybody anyhow. Except he knew that wasn’t true. Plus, Tony was the old one. He was the one over forty. He was the one with the creaking joints and the tired skin. Lord, he didn’t even know how long he could keep on being Iron Man.

Maybe some sleep would help him. He couldn’t remember when the last time he’d actually went to bed and slept for any time at all. He didn’t call for JARVIS to turn on the lights as he lie on the bed. Instead, he curled the covers around him and listened to the darkness. In the shade of the night, he heard footfalls and then the wind. There shouldn’t be wind at the penthouse level. But still he heard the wind and the patter of rain as if it was outside his window sill. He looked to the windows and saw a fire escape that shouldn’t be there. Even as he sat up and stared at it, his bedroom door – that was not his bedroom door – creaked open.

Nothing about the room looked right. This wasn’t his expensive bedroom high up in the clouds of Manhattan. As the door swung open, Tony searched the darkened room for a weapon, anything to defend himself. But it wasn’t his room and in the doorway stood Steve.

“Tony?” Steve peered in as if he was intruding.

He was – but it didn’t matter. A dream. Tony told himself it had to be a dream, though he couldn’t remember falling asleep. “Yeah?” His own voice sounded off, too tentative, too worried.

Steve entered the room and then closed the door. “Tony. I- I have to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Tony said and sat up near the head of the bed. Scratches marred the old wooden headboard of the bed. Definitely not Tony’s bed or room or apartment. Steve moved closer and he blocked the moonlight streaming in from the window. In the distance, Tony could hear the streets below – nothing sounded right. He shouldn’t even be able to hear the street – hell, his windows didn’t open in the penthouse. But the old fashioned window was open slightly in the summer night.

Steve gazed at him. “I don’t know how to do this. It’s all different for me.”

Tony slowly shook his head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I never had anyone.” Steve looked away like he had earlier in the day, but then he had looked into the sun. Now it was the moon and the night calling back. “Peggy was just a dream. We never had a date. There was never anyone.”

“And now?” Tony asked. He trespassed. Somehow he trespassed into secrets he shouldn’t know. Though the strange room he found himself in was small, he felt like the expanse of the universe opened up around him.

“You’re there. I grew up thinking it was not okay. I never explored the idea that I could, that I might be attracted to-.” He stopped and swallowed hard. He couldn’t look at Tony. “I don’t know what to do.”

The sounds of the street below died away, and in this silent space, Tony understood that breaking its sanctity with a clever quip would tear away any hope for something more. The fabric of space and time that held their astral projections together would fray and disintegrate. So he slowly reached out his hand to touch the insubstantial. When Tony grasped his lax fingers, Steve turned to face him with
a look of longing and fear mixed together.

“Don’t know if I can do this,” Steve said again.

“Sometimes it’s not about knowing,” Tony whispered and his voice sounded husky, heavy with the strumming of his soul. Steve allowed Tony to pull him over closer to the bed. “What are you afraid of?”

Steve still didn’t look at him as he bowed his head. “Nothing. Everything. I don’t want to be something wrong. I was wrong for so long.”

“What’s wrong about wanting to be with someone?” Tony asked. “We’re two adults. What’s wrong with it?”

Steve met his gaze for the first time and the sorrow and pain struck Tony as if it were a physical blow. “You don’t want me to tell you everything they said in my day. Everything the Church still says today.”

“You don’t have to believe that.” Tony’s words felt as if they hung in the air with a specific density. The room, the world around him, became heavier and thicker.

“I don’t know what to believe. My soul, the universe is telling me something, but my brain and the knowledge I grew up with says another,” Steve said. He stood right over Tony now, the light around him burnished like a halo. Part of Tony wanted to laugh at it, the religious connotations not lost on him.

“It comes down to what you’re going to believe, I suppose,” Tony whispered. He couldn’t find the strength to fight the profundity of the moment, weighed as it was with such solidity.

“Then,” Steve said and there was a quirk of a smile to his lips. “Maybe I should take a page out of your book. Maybe I should try something?” He leaned down and, for a moment, paused before he pressed dry lips against Tony’s mouth. Frozen, Tony did not respond. It wasn’t passionate or moving, but analytical and evaluative. Steve stood back up and stared down at Tony.

“What?” It was all Tony could come up with to ask.

“It didn’t feel bad,” Steve said. “It didn’t feel like hell raining down on my head. It didn’t feel like anything at all.”

Tony gambled then. He took a chance. He stood up and Steve went back only a footstep to allow him room. Seeking, Tony said, “Then how about this?” He reached up and gently brought Steve into his arms. He didn’t try kissing, he wasn’t going to go that far – at least that wasn’t his intention. He felt the stiffness of Steve in his arms, but slowly Steve brought his arms up to encompass Tony. They stood there like that for a few minutes as Tony counted the muscles in Steve’s back giving way, as he relaxed and laid his cheek against Tony’s temple. Even Tony eased his weariness, his tension. Their souls resonated through the bond and it was right. Tony felt the tangle of souls that had knotted and now relaxed.

Steve moved just an inch and looked down on Tony. “It doesn’t feel bad.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Tony said and kept his gaze fixed on Steve. He didn’t dare break this moment with glib responses.

“Can I? Would it be possible to try again?” Steve searched his face, his eyes flickering around Tony as if he couldn’t believe what he saw or touched. “It’s just a dream, I know. But can I try again?”
Tony swallowed and nodded. Steve waited a moment and then bent down. This time he licked his lips right before he touched Tony, the smoothness, the tenderness shook Tony to the core. But what moved him to near tears was the passion beneath it. The yearning for a connection clear through the kiss. Steve pursued and Tony followed his lead, knowing that the connection though built by an inscrutable energy between them still remained frail and nascent. When Steve came away from the kiss, the room seemed brighter to Tony. So bright and warm. Steve smiled and ran a hand in a caress down Tony’s cheek.

“I never thought-.” He didn’t finish. “All these years, I wanted a connection, someone to be with. I kept saying it’s hard to find someone with shared life experiences-.”

Tony stopped him with a finger to his lips. “We do have shared life experiences, Steve. We do. I’ve wanted that connection too. Every damned day. I wanted it.”

“It’s only a dream,” Steve said and leaned down again to touch his lips not only to Tony’s mouth, but to his neck, he traversed downward and Tony felt his own needs heighten.

He pushed Steve to stop. “Don’t go there if you don’t want to.”

He shook his head and nuzzled at Tony’s neck. “It’s just a dream.” He kissed and licked and Tony’s knees went weak. The thrumming in his head vibrated with yearning, with longing – that final reach to grab and get something long sought. He couldn’t parse how it was Steve. They always fought with one another, always butted heads, but their souls aligned. That was the difference. Their souls comprehended when their minds did not.

“It feels so right, so how can it be wrong?” Steve said as Tony found himself sitting on the bed and Steve kneeling at his feet. “Tell me what to do. I don’t know what to do.”

Over Steve’s shoulder, Tony saw the tenement house across the alley way through the window. He spotted the old lamp on the table next to the bed. It was glass and hand painted. The bedspread beneath him felt hand made. His logical mind told him he was still in his Tower, that this was just a dream.

Tony tugged off his shirt, revealing the arc reactor scar, and then simply nodded to Steve, who did the same. “Now touch me.”

Steve laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder, and then stroked downward to his chest, to his nipple. When Tony hitched a breath at the touch of his nipple, Steve glanced at him and smiled. He leaned forward and kissed, flicking the nib with his tongue. Tony ran his hands through Steve’s hair holding him in place, loving the touch. For a second, Steve paused and said, “Good?”

“Very good,” Tony agreed and Steve continued. He licked and kissed along Tony’s chest and let his one hand drop to Tony’s waist, and then finally as Tony arched into Steve’s ministrations, to his lap.

“What?” Steve said with his forehead pressed against Tony’s shoulder.

Tony suffered through a shiver of desire and said, “Only if you want to.” Because he didn’t want to think about this as a dream. Somehow, someway, his soul wanted it to be real. The chords sang out, and he hungered for Steve to understand, to comprehend the music.

Steve leaned down as Tony opened his jeans. When he released his cock, Tony sighed as the tension race through him. Steve met Tony’s eyes and then tentatively swept downward, kissing along the way, setting Tony on fire. Steve teased Tony with a simple lick as if attempting to figure out what to do next. He licked again and again until Tony had his hands planted on the bed and his hips rising to
meet Steve.

“Please, please,” Tony cried and wished, if this were a dream, he would wake up. He didn’t want to be tormented. With a fingertip, Steve explored Tony’s cock, lightly caressing it, down to the root and then back up. All the time he bit at his lower lip, his attention focused only on Tony.

“Will you? Will you let me taste you?” Steve said and the blush to his cheeks heightened.

“God, please.”

Then Tony was cradled in Steve’s mouth, first only laying against his warm tongue. As Steve got used to the weight, the taste, Tony shuddered and covered his eyes with his one hand. But Steve would not allow it. He reached up and pulled him away. For a second he let Tony go. “I can’t do this alone. I need you to help me.”

“Jesus, yes,” Tony said and brought Steve back to his cock. Steve answered Tony’s unspoken words by bringing him all in at once. Tony nearly shot right then, but he cringed and held back. “Move, please, Steve move.”

Steve never hesitated. He ran his tongue up and down Tony’s length as he swallowed and bobbed his head. It thrilled and drove Tony into a madness. He heard someone talking. It might have been him. He didn’t know. He found himself holding Steve’s head, thrusting into his willing, moist mouth. He could have Steve on his cock all day. Holding him and warming him. Even as he thought it their souls chimed together, wrapping tight and urgent. Steve groaned around him as he fisted his hand and pushed it at his own hard cock. Tony couldn’t hold on, he needed more and he grasped at Steve’s hair, pushing farther down his throat and then Steve gripped Tony’s hips, helping him to go deeper still.

Tony saw the tear stains on Steve’s cheeks as he fought his own gag response. But he was a fast learner and he relaxed his throat until Tony pushed further and then Steve swallowed. The undulations sent shockwaves through Tony and the coil deep in his groin released like a spring and he came with a hard jerk until he was paralyzed by it. He couldn’t stop as Steve welcomed him, pulled him deeper. Air. Oxygen. It vacated his lungs as he came and came in a spill down Steve’s willing and open throat until finally he was spent. The air burned as he writhed through his first breath in forever. He opened his eyes and there was only silence.

Silence.

He was in his own room. The windows peered out to the large cityscape of 21st century Manhattan again, not early 20th century Brooklyn tenements. Manhattan at pre-dawn greeted him. His whole body shook, trembled hard against the dream. Or was it a nightmare? He thought for sure he would be wet after his dream fuck. But he wasn’t. He was flaccid but warmed by the after effects of an amazing orgasm.

“Jesus,” Tony muttered. He sat up but dropped back down as the room spun around and he gagged a little. He covered his face with his hands and tried to settle his nausea. What the hell just happened? “JARVIS, what time is it?”

“Four am sir,” JARVIS answered.

He’d walked into the bedroom at around ten at night. He must have fallen asleep, had a helluva dream, and did not climax though it felt like the best one he had in his life. Finally, the dizziness resolved and he stumbled to the bathroom, blinking at the bright lights enough that he asked JARVIS to dim them. Maybe he just drank too much. He remembered drinking a little last night. But shit, it
wasn’t that much. He’s not a light weight in that department.

He stripped and got the shower running. He stood under the powerful heads (because he had four – why wouldn’t he?). The water hit him and he grew numb from it. He stared down at his penis and wanted to call it a traitor because what the hell was going on? Taking in a deep inhalation, Tony decided the best thing to do was to chant the damned Mantra and see if the Caped Wonder could do it. He needed to get this soul bond shit under control and get some finesse to his understanding of what Beloved meant.

Once he finished showering, Tony dressed and ventured to the kitchen. Normally when he got up there was usually some sort of breakfast and coffee made by his wait staff, but since it was so early they hadn’t arrived yet. He settled for making his own coffee and pulling out some frozen waffles that he could pop in the toaster. When he finished he had to admit that he was proud of his little feat. He sat down and started to eat just as the staff began appearing. He waved off breakfast but told them to make whatever they wanted – his chef and staff routinely ate their meals at the Tower, all provided by Tony. He even had an allowance for them to eat at home along with a generous salary. Most of his staff had elected to live in the Tower, rent free.

He raised his coffee mug to them as he scooped up the plate with the waffles in hand and headed toward his workshop. With a little time and energy spent not thinking of his weird dreams, Tony focused on his work, though his mind drifted to the soul and the core and his astral projection more than once. He found himself muttering the cursed Mantra. He hated it but acknowledged it for what it was worth. It worked. It kept his brain on the task at hand. He didn’t get so much feedback from the new threads of the pack reaching out to Barnes and mystery witch girl and speedy brother. Maybe that explained the strange dreams.

He had JARVIS call up information on Beloved and soul packs. Still a paltry amount and most of it was hearsay and rumor. As he worked, instead of having the loud and wonderful music of Zeppelin playing in the background, JARVIS narrated the information on Beloved.

“JARVIS,” Tony said about two hours into the mundane. “Go to blogs, message boards, anything like that and get what they say about Beloved and soul packs.”

“Sir, I must remind you that much of that is fantasy and not truth.”

“I get that. But all myths and legends have some truth, right?” Tony soldered as he spoke.

“It depends on what the truth is. It is not generally believed that Icarus flew too close to the sun in reality.”

“Isn’t it?” Tony continued to work. “Just play it.”

JARVIS began. Most of the information seemed to be created by an underground movement similar to fandoms, where outsiders of the soul pack fantasized about what it might be, including shaping myths and rules about it. From having names scrawled on arms, to timers counting down, to not being able to tell a lie to your soul mate – how awful would that be? One interesting blog seemed to have an inside track on soul mates and soul packs.

“It is generally believed that the 44th president and his wife were Beloved. From evidence, it is clear that the FLOTUS was the leader and the president the Beloved. The pack members also included the vice president at the time, a well-known talk show host, and an actress. Other members are not known.”

“So the FLOTUS was the leader,” Tony said. “Interesting. Is there more?”
“Of this fiction, yes,” JARVIS replied.

“Just continue, JARVIS. What do they say about the title Beloved?”

“Beloved is considered to the rarest-.”

“Stop, stop, stop,” Tony said and scrubbed at his hair with his nails. Nothing. All morning and he still got nothing from the web. But that was probably because soul packs were so rare, and that most soul packs were not scientifically, rigorously studied. He needed to talk to Bruce about investigating this whole fucked up thing.

“Sir, Captain Rogers is at the entrance to the workshop and would like to see you,” JARVIS announced.

Oh great – his nighttime visitor and time traveling sex companion. Tony spurted out a laugh. “Sure, let him in. Why not?”

The Plexiglas doors to his workshop slid open and Steve entered with a file folder tucked under his arm. At first sight, he looked no different than he did yesterday afternoon, but on closer inspection, Tony glimpsed the lines of exhaustion on his face. He even detected a hint of sadness the way he held his shoulders and the slight down turn of his mouth.

“Tony,” Steve said with a short nod. “I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I was out of line.”

“Out of line for calling me a pervert? Or for being the regular ass that you are?” Tony shot back. He could try harder, he admitted to himself but the fact was when Tony was cornered he snarled and bit back.

Steve scowled but swallowed once and his jaw twitched before he rasped out a reply, “I’m sorry that I inferred being gay meant you were a pervert. I didn’t intend that at all.”

Of course, Tony couldn’t leave it alone. “What did you intend?”

Steve turned slightly to the side and opened a hand to Tony. “I am not here to argue with you, Tony. I just wanted to clear the air. After last nig- after yesterday I wanted to discuss some truths with you.”

“Truths?” Tony said and left the workbench. He hadn’t missed the slip about last night. What could that mean? Should he investigate, prod, push Steve to admit what that slip actually meant? He walked around the bench and joined Steve in the open space in the U shaped workspace. “What do you mean?”

Steve inhaled sharply, and then went to a cleared space on one of the many worktables. “I wanted to tell you something. It’s not going to be easy for you to hear but in light of the fact Bucky could show up at any time, I think you have a right to know my suspicions.”

Curiosity piqued, Tony went to Steve’s side and watched as he spread out pages and pages of a file. Most of the text was in Russian, but along the margins someone scribbled translations.

“Natasha helped me with some of the translations. Some of it I did, and they aren’t as good. My Russian is rusty. This is Bucky’s file when he was in custody of Hydra for all of those years, decades really. How they turned him into the Winter Soldier, how they tortured him and programmed him.”

Steve didn’t meet Tony’s gaze. Instead he pointed to different pages as he explained. “Bucky had a serum that Zola had injected in him in ’43 when his unit had been captured. It wasn’t a perfect replica of the Erskine formula from what I could gather from the notes here. I don’t even think they had the vita rays. But it did something to Bucky. After Bucky fell from the train, he survived due to
that serum. He was found by Soviet troops and taken into custody. Eventually, they moved him to be part of the Hydra experiments. Apparently, Hydra crosses international borders – infests a lot of different countries.”

“Okay?” Tony said. “So part of the dissonance we’re getting from the link is due to all of this.”

Steve nodded but still didn’t look up at Tony. “There’s something else. Something horrible, Tony.” Now he did move. He met Tony’s gaze. “When Natasha and I were on the run from SHIELD, we ended up finding a version of Zola. His mind, believe it or not, had been uploaded into this huge databank. He told us things about how Hydra grew inside of SHIELD. He called it a beautiful parasite.” He made a little laugh. “How beautiful could it be if it’s a parasite?” His eyes glimmered with unshed tears as he looked at all of the paper work. “You have to believe me, Tony. If it had been Bucky, if he had any control, any free will he would never have done it.”

“Done what?” Tony said and the lab around him disintegrated, pixelating away. All he saw was Steve and the papers strewn around the table.

“Zola he said, well, he inferred that history was changed when it needed to be. People were wiped out, killed. The Winter Soldier was their assassin, Tony. He killed them. The Winter Soldier, not Bucky. You have to believe that. You have to see that it wasn’t Bucky.” Steve was pleading with him and, for the life of him, Tony couldn’t understand what he was getting at – who?

“Who did he kill?”

Steve gulped in a breath and then in two words changed Tony’s life. “Your parents.”

Tony blinked several times and stared at Steve. Only Steve and the words existed now. The words ricocheted in Tony’s head, bouncing around like bullets fired in rapid succession. As they hit his brain matter, it scattered around, splattering in his skull. Putting together two sane thoughts became impossible. His desire to lash out grew as the bullets of information shredded his brain. He couldn’t rationalize. There was nothing there to work with anymore.

“You fucking knew?”

“For a few weeks,” Steve said and put his hands up as if he was surrendering to Tony. He sent calming waves to Tony through the bond, trying to reason with him. “I knew for a few weeks. That’s all. I came to you as soon as Sam and I verified-.”

“Sam knows?” Tony snarled. He rebuffed Steve’s attempts to react him, shredding the soul bonds as easy as paper.

“So does Natasha,” Steve said. He didn’t take no for an answer, he wouldn’t be rejected. He kept at it, trying to grasp Tony through the astral dimension.

One thing hit Tony harder than the actual fact that his parents didn’t simply die in a car accident but were murdered by a WWII assassin, and that was the link. “But you gave the Winter Soldier a bond. You threaded him into the pack. You called him Brother. He’s forever my fucking Brother because of you.” No thought formed in his head. He wrenched the bond between them and twisted it, contorting it until he saw tears form in Steve’s eyes. He wanted Steve to understand, to know how horrible the idea, the concept was that he would be forever linked to someone that killed his mother. “Brother! You called him brother. And you knew about this last night. When we went to the wreck, when you came-.” He stopped speaking and just let the rage boil over him.

“Please, Tony, he didn’t. It’s not his fault. He’s a victim,” Steve cried out but all Tony heard through
the noise was the discord of the Brother bond. It crackled in his head, deafening him. “I bonded to him before I bonded to you. He’s a victim. He’s my friend.”

“I’m your god damned Beloved and that’s supposed to mean something, something significant. How could you? What -,” Tony gulped in a breath and managed to spit out.

“My Brother. He’s my Brother and he killed them.” The tears wouldn’t stop. They ran rivers down his face and burned his cheeks. “You knew it then. You knew. When you-.” All he could think, all he could picture was Steve on his knees sucking him – and he knew. He knew that Tony’s parents were dead because of his friend. Tony didn’t care that it was just a fucking dream. It meant that Tony had fantasized about a man who kept a vital piece of information from him, one so upsetting that it appalled Tony. The repugnance grew and Tony sneered at him, “You sick bastard. How could you not even consider my feelings, what this would mean? Why didn’t you tell me right away? I’m your Beloved and it’s been weeks.”

“You left. You didn’t even visit me in the hospital. I didn’t think you wanted to see me.” Steve stood gripping the table edge, holding himself in place and waiting for Tony’s next attack. “I didn’t have a choice. It just happened. I swear it,” Steve said. “I swear it Tony. I didn’t want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you. I came with all of the evidence, everything so you would understand.” His soul stood apart, giving Tony space and room to decide, to weigh his intentions.

Tony stopped dead. His breath came in heavy pants; any air he brought into his lungs seared him. The bond between them felt like a living thing. It throbbed and pulsed with crackling energy. It spoke out and everything else faded away. He heard it, the truth of it through the bond. Steve’s sorrow. His horror. His absolute faith that it was not Bucky Barnes but some distorted tortured version of his friend, his Brother, that killed Tony’s parents and dozens, if not hundreds, of others.

Tony could end it here and now. He didn’t have to be tied to this. Hell, he could call Iron Legion to him. He wouldn’t though because that was insane and while Tony might live on the edge of sanity at times, he always ended up doing the right thing. Or at least he tried. “I’m not sure I can do this.” As he said it Tony realized he echoed what Steve had some last night in his dreams.

“I’m not asking you to do anything right now. Just give it a chance, okay? Just look at these papers and tell me if you can try and see through it.” Steve pointed to the papers on Tony’s work bench. “I’m not asking for a miracle. I just-. I thought you might understand. After thinking about it -.” He hesitated for a moment before he added, “Last night, I knew I had to come to you and be direct.”

He waited for Tony to respond, but when he didn’t Steve said, “If you blame anyone, Tony, blame me. I was stupid and arrogant and thought I could do anything back in the day. Hell, I was Captain America. I was the one who let Bucky fall from that train. If it hadn’t been for me, then Bucky wouldn’t have been subjected to years of torture. He wouldn’t have been the Winter Soldier. If anyone is responsible for your parents’ deaths it’s me. Put the blame on me.”

Tony wanted to agree, to say ‘you’re damned right’ but the truth was – and he found it hard to swallow because who could he take his grief out on – that the guilty party was Hydra, not Barnes and surely not Steve. “Just go, I need – I need some time.”

Steve looked at Tony, his arms clamped around his body in a self-hug. Tony thought he’d never seen Steve so unsure. The soul bonds mourned and shuddered, quaking like a troubled flower in the wake of a storm. “Okay.”

He was still angry. The horror of what he’d learned lingered. It was a bad taste forever marring his feelings surrounding Bucky Barnes. One thing he could admit. “I can’t have him here. Not here. Not now. I have to process this.”
Steve nodded. He surveyed the workshop, the papers abandoned on Tony’s workbench and then said, “I have to check on Clint. He needs help. I want to help you, Tony. If you’ll let me. I’ll go to see Clint. The nurse called me this morning and told me that he was waking up. If you need me, you’ll know where to find me.”

“I won’t need you. Not at all.” Tony snapped and Steve’s face crumpled.

He shook his head. “I can’t say anything more than I already did. I can show you more of the proof if you need.” Steve walked away then when Tony failed to respond. He left the workshop.

Tony stood there, staring at the empty space where Steve had just occupied. Even the bond throbbed an ache like a hunger that wouldn’t go away. To think that just last night he’d dreamed of Steve. This morning, the seeds of hope had sprouted and now the dry and brittle truth killed every little bloom.

He picked up a handful of the papers, the dossier on Barnes. Everyone knew. Natasha, Sam, Steve. Everyone knew that Tony’s parents had been murdered. And somehow Steve expected Tony to accept the murderer into the pack. To call him Brother. To share the feelings of warmth, security, and family that radiated off of Steve when he thought of Barnes. It sickened Tony.

He dropped the papers and marched off. He went to his penthouse apartment and went directly to his bedroom, but he stopped at the doorway. The bed was still rumpled from the night before – the staff hadn’t had a chance to straighten it up yet. A lingering scent of musk hung in the air and the reality of his dream wrapped around him. But it wasn’t real, not at all.

He entered the room, flopping down on the bed and then throwing his arms out as he stared blankly at the ceiling. The worse part was that he liked Steve. He rejected the idea that he should lay the blame of his parents’ deaths at Steve’s feet. It wasn’t Steve’s fault. Hell, it wasn’t Bucky’s fault. But Tony knew – comprehended that someday, he would share a space with Bucky. Bucky, as part of the pack, would dream or recall the moments of Tony’s mother’s death and Tony would experience it as if he stood right next to him and watched. Forever, the soul bond linked Tony to Barnes. Forever the soul bond hung the images of murder like laundry on a line, waiting for him to collect them. A horror show just outside his reach, but always there taunting him.

He squeezed his eyes closed, trying not to imagine how they died. It was hard enough with an accident; murder was a whole different story. With his eyes closed he thought about their deaths, how it must have been, and then through the chords of the pack – a distant pain sounded. A pain so bright and singular it startled him. The purity of the sorrow and the loss of something – the loss of self – dug into him and hollowed out his bones.

It was then he recognized him – Bucky Barnes – weeping for Tony’s loss. Stunned, Tony sat up with his hand to his chest. For long minutes, he was glad that Barnes hadn’t been in the room when Tony found out the truth. He shivered. For the rest of the day, the horror and sorrow streaming through the bond from a distant Brother plagued him, a phantom lingering in the distance waiting to ruin him.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 9- Steve fears he's lost Clint to the abyss and Tony to the truth.

Just a little note: Chapter 9 is a long one - 15k and just sent to my beta reader so it might
be a little late coming.

Also I am scheduled for surgery on April 16 which might delay chapters for a bit, but I do hope to get Chapter 9 posted before April 22.
Steve got into the elevator and asked for the med-bay floor. He leaned against the back of the car as the lift closed. His shoulders slumped and he let out a long exhale. “Well, that didn’t go well,” he murmured and clutched his arms around his chest. He hadn’t done that in years, decades really. When he was younger and smaller, after he confronted another bully in an alleyway, he always ended up with blood stains on his shirt. In order to hide them he would fold his arms around his chest so his mother wouldn’t see. She knew. She always knew regardless of how much he tried to hide his failings. Only thing was Tony wasn’t a bully in an alleyway. He was Steve’s Beloved and he was hurting – a lot. Steve felt the reverberations of Tony’s reaction to the news. How it both horrified and sickened Tony in one breath. The shock upset the bond until it quaked and threatened the pack.

Steve laid his head against the back of the elevator as the marks on his arm and chest burned. During his time as a SHIELD agent and leader of a dissembled pack, he learned as much as he could about the pack dynamics, but that was what his mother would call being ‘book smart’. He needed to be more than smart about it. He needed to be tactical. That was his strength. Throughout the years of being pack leader, Steve tried to fish out the reason why some people bonded and others did not. He attempted to figure out why members were named certain roles. None of it made sense in the beginning and after so long, Steve was fairly certain it would never gel and mold into anything he could shape or understand. Why was Bruce Healer? Why was Tony Beloved? Steve closed his eyes; he did not need to go through that hell again, beating himself up for thoughts that swayed toward the deviant. Two years passed since the first bonding and the benefits of the pack eluded him.

The elevator doors opened knocking him out of his reverie and he walked out of the lift. The long, bright hallway, white and chrome with glass doors at the entrance to the med-bay, felt sterile but inviting. The walls had frameless oil paintings in the style of post-modern. Steve wasn’t sure he liked it much but it matched the highly stylized, futuristic look of the Tower. Back in the day a lot of hospitals had white and army green colors with metal framed beds. Welcoming was not a word he would use. The med-bay looked to be minimally staffed and he wondered how that would work if the team had a real emergency. He’d have to ask Tony, but that was something that could wait. He opened the door of the med-bay and several staffers – nurses – at the station peered up at him. What he assumed was a station actually looked more like a curved laboratory bench. And the nurses? Not nurses at all, he didn’t think.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Clint Barton?” he said and one of the not-nurses pointed to the hall. She
had on a lab coat and had what he assumed was a pipet in her hand. “Okay.” He followed the silent direction down the hallway toward the large glass windows that looked out to the steel mountains of the city. The whole of Manhattan looked to be at his feet. It was beautiful and classic all at once. It brought back memories.

“Captain Rogers.”

He turned to find a woman with a lab coat approaching him. She extended her hand and smiled. “Doctor Helen Cho. It’s nice to meet you.”

He accepted her hand, whispering the Mantra and calming his soul. His astral projection never trembled as he shook her hand, and, in many ways, he was grateful. He didn’t need any more complications in the pack that seemed to be in flux all the time now. “Nice to meet you. Aren’t you working on simulated tissues or something like that?”

Her smile beamed. “Yes, I am. I’m surprised you know that. It’s kind of an esoteric topic of research.”

“I like to read and keep up with the different upcoming technologies.” Steve replied. He might be from a different century, but Steve spent hours as a child reading dime store sci-fi stories. He had loved to dream about the future. Following the amazing advances these days helped educate him and fill part of the void that existed in his life. He glanced around the med-bay and asked, “You’re working for Stark Industries?”

She shook her head. “No, just here on a sabbatical. Exchanging ideas with some of the research staff.”

It made sense. Full time medical staff wouldn’t have lot to do on a daily basis. Steve pointed behind him. “If that’s research staff, how does it work with this being a med-bay?”

Doctor Cho waved for him to follow her and she began giving him a short tour of the facilities. “I’ve only been here for about three weeks. I’m planning on staying for about two months or so. But according to what I know, Mister Stark set this whole facility up for the Avengers team. Didn’t you know that?”

Of course. Tony designed and planned out a place for the team, the pack, and never informed him of anything. Though they’d only been bonded for a few weeks and he doubted that Tony had done all of this in the intervening weeks, Steve would have liked to have been informed. Then he thought about the information on Bucky, how he had waited until he verified everything before approaching Tony. He understood a little of Tony’s argument, though he still stood by his own decision to get all of his ducks in a row before going to Tony with the truth. He pressed his lips together in a tight line. “I didn’t know that Tony had done that. Not really.”

“Well, he did. But the fact remains that most of the physicians and nurses on call wouldn’t have a lot to do most of the time, so he employs only physician scientists and research nurses. That way they do a ton of research interrupted by actual medical duties when needed,” she said. They walked past multiple laboratories. Steve couldn’t identify half of the equipment in the rooms or on the lab benches. Along the way she pointed out state of the art medical instruments from heart monitors to MRI. “An open MRI – much easier to stand.”

“Okay,” he said. He knew a little about MRIs. During the first years working for SHIELD, Natasha ended up a significant shoulder injury which led to imaging of the joint to ensure no tears and to assess the damage. Cho led him across the hallway toward the triage bay.
As he followed her, Steve asked “Have you been treating Clint? Do you know his status?”

Her expression changed, shifting to worry. “I’m not his attending doctor, but I do know that he’s very confused and difficult to understand right now. He hadn’t been responsive until this morning, and now he’s agitated and difficult. Are you sure-.”

Instead of waiting to find anything more out, Steve reached out within the bond – the bond he was supposed to have with Clint and found a tattered thread. The tendrils reached out as if in fog to an unseen shore. Through the bond he felt the vibrations of anger and pain and something more insidious – something Steve knew too well – isolation. He focused his attention on Cho. “I need to see him. Now. He needs my help.”

“I’m not sure you can do anything for him. He’s cognitively not following directions. If SHIELD was still around, we would be calling their doctors in. As it is, we’re considering whether or not we should-.”

He put his one hand up to stop her. “I’m sorry, Doctor. But I really need to see him. He needs me. Right now, he needs me.” The train accident hadn’t happened that long ago – only days – but the fact remained that this was the first time that the doctors reported Clint being actively awake. Steve had tried to wake him through the soul bond, but there wasn’t a pathway since the bond hadn’t formed correctly. Whatever had happened to Clint, the guilt lay solely at Steve’s feet.

Cho tilted her head and then started to protest, but her line of sight fell on his wrist- his left arm. She saw the brand, the marking of a soul pack. Not many would recognize the patterns so easily, but Cho must have had some experience in the past. “Oh. Oh! Yes, sorry. I’ll bring you to him right away.”

Without pause she started down the hallway and Steve followed. They ended up in a small room off to the side. When Steve rounded the corner and entered the room, he staggered to a stop. Clint was tied to the bed, throwing his head around, his body jittering as if he was going through withdrawals. Sweat puddled around him, covering his body. The stench of fear and adrenaline filled the room.

“Why is he tied down?” Steve raced to the bed. The leather bindings held Clint at wrist and ankle.

“I don’t know. I’m not his doctor,” Cho said and hurried to stand beside Steve. A nurse came into the room, her demeanor fierce but not unnervingly so.

The nurse immediately addressed their concern. “Sir, he awoke this morning and managed to knock one doctor out and injure a nurse. We had no other choice. We’ve been trying to-.” She stopped as Clint screamed and spittle few out of his mouth. Clearing her throat, she said, “We’ve been trying to find the doctors who treated him at SHIELD, but it’s been futile.”

“They were probably Hydra anyhow,” Steve said. He stood by Clint’s bed and put his hand on Clint shoulder. The man vibrated with energy. His whole body pitched and shivered under Steve’s touch. His soul echoed his body’s shuddering. “This is my fault, Clint. We’re going to fix this now.” The confidence in his voice belayed the true fear thrumming through him. Clint had been through so much after Loki. His mind had been violated and he spent hours upon hours in counseling and not trusting himself. On top of that the idea the Hydra had been in charge of his recovery had spooked Clint enough that the normally reticent archer confided that fact to Steve. The guilt about what happened when he had been under the influence of the staff ate at Clint. Steve might not know Clint all that well, but he understood the kind of man he was. Offering Clint a way to redemption during the Battle of New York had been the right thing to do, but now Steve doubted his actions. Asking Clint to join the pack when the archer had subtly showed signs of doubt may have caused even worse damage to the nascent bond.
“Clint, look at me,” Steve said.

In the bed, struggling to get free, Clint ignored Steve. He thrashed and arched up, drool dripping from his mouth. This was one of the reasons Steve needed to get the pack under control, needed to know more than just what the books and wise men told him. He needed practical experience. He recalled as a new Captain America how awkward and unrefined his fighting style and strategic plans were, but now he had years of experience on his side. As a souler, as a leader of a soul pack, he was that young naïve Captain again, but he reached down deep into his fears and swept them away.

Focused, Steve clasped Clint’s trembling hand. “Okay, now we’re going to do this.” He closed his eyes as Clint cried out in a wordless sob. Steve steadied his heart, breathed in and breathed out. He let his nerves settle as he spoke. All the other times Steve had visited, Clint had been still like the grave and nothing Steve could do would wake him. “Clint, listen to me. I’m calling you.” Clint threw himself about on the bed, but Steve stayed rock steady.

The bond fluttered around him, like a tattered battle flag. Steve reached out inwardly to grab them. Yet, as soon as he gathered a few of the tendrils more would slip away like whispers of clouds in his hands. He forced himself not to panic, not to allow the anxiety of the moment to capture him and use him. He eased away from his fears and concentrated on the anguished call of the soul before him. It ached like stabbing cold winds of winter. Grimacing he began again to collect the remnants of Clint’s soul only to be thwarted again and again. Maybe he approached it the wrong way. Maybe he needed to command the souls together.

With the new tactic in mind, Steve reached out to find the identity of Clint in the pack. He needed to finish the bond. He didn’t know exactly how to repair a bond, nor did he know how to fix a bond that never really was, but he pursued its tangles. He sought them. The energy turned from cold and foreboding to hot and dangerous. It sparked and burnt within them. He could see how it seeped into Clint, how it devoured his mind. Like tentacles it slithered through Clint, consuming him as he fought to get away, but he couldn’t because the viper was inside of him, inside his being. For one bright moment, Steve understood that their souls existed not as part of them, but as their spirits trapped onto the physical plane. At this moment, Clint’s soul struggled to gain its freedom, to disembark these Earthly bindings. So Steve became the pursuer.

He hunted the viper, trailed it until he could fashion enough of his own internal energy, calling on the depths of his core, pulling from the energies pulsing through the pack to wrangle it, to quiet it, to bring it to submission. It lashed out though in one heavy gasp to throttle against Steve’s own more orderly energy. It crackled and he only just muffled the pain as it skewered deep inside of him. Steve felt himself shiver at the assault. He refused to give up, standing stock still at Clint’s bedside as the man withered before him and Clint’s ethereal being fought against the shackles of a mortal life. Steve held on, held tight, as if he gripped the only rope that what was left of Clint clung to as he hung over the abyss of death. He battled and threw all of his knowledge into it, but the fact was Steve didn’t know enough. He grunted against the pain that grew. His brain seared with the fire of the soul as it grappled to get away from him, from Clint, from the mundane of Earthly existence. Steve heaved as hard and as long as he could, but it didn’t matter – he couldn’t do it. The soul snapped one last time and scorched Steve’s grip on it, so hot and so brilliant that Steve screamed out loud and collapsed to the floor. A flood of bile came up and Steve vomited on the floor as Cho bent over him, holding his shoulders and calling for the help.

Instead of the heat from the battle, Steve only felt the cold and ice of death. He trembled and for a second believed he might be back in the ice. Cho knelt next to him and he heard other voices, voices calling out. He must have blanked out for a moment. The next thing he knew Bruce and Tony hunched over him as a nurse wiped his face.
“Hey, Cap, you with us?” Bruce asked. When Steve focused on them, he noted that Tony looked gray and pale.

“Ye-yeah,” Steve replied but couldn’t stop the quaking from the cold.

“Can someone get me a warm blanket?” Cho called and Steve heard the shuffle of feet as one of the nurses went to do her bidding.

“Cap, you think you could sit up?” Bruce said. His hand gripped Steve’s upper arm.

Steve nodded, and both Bruce and Tony helped Steve into a sitting position. He noticed that Clint was still on the gurney. Reaching up, he tried to grab the archer’s lax hand. “Is he?”

“He’s out of it, but okay,” Cho reported. “Whatever you did, or tried to do, don’t do it again.” She accepted the blanket offered to her by a nurse and wrapped it around Steve’s shoulders.

“Gotta agree with Cho here. You about scared the shit out of me. What the hell were you doing?”

Tony said and rubbed at his chest.

“Trying to help Clint,” Steve said as he climbed to his feet. He wavered for a moment, but both Bruce and Tony were there to support him. “I suppose I called out again?”

“Not really,” Tony answered but didn’t elaborate.

“When you tried to help Clint, well, everything went a little psychedelic,” Bruce answered.

Steve coughed and cleared his throat as the world around him came into sharp focus again. “I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“It means you sent us on a trip through Oz, old man,” Tony said. “Does that work for you?”

“Tony,” Bruce said and frowned at him. Tony shrugged but the far away haunted look stayed. His gaze never really met Steve’s eyes.

“Holy shit! Really?” Tony said and that distant look dissipated as he latched onto the new information. “Like it’s trying to go beyond or something?”

Steve pulled the blanket off his shoulders though the cold remained in his chest. “Yeah, like it’s shifting and it kind of feels like it sees the body as a trap? A prison?”

“Wow, talk about mortal coil and all that stuff,” Tony said and he turned to study Clint. “Wow.”

Bruce furrowed his brow and took off his glasses. “So you were in the middle of bonding and it was interrupted?”

Steve went to Clint’s bedside as one nurse went to clean up the mess he’d made. He turned to her and knelt to help her though she did most of the work. Tony watched him silently. Once they finished the task, the nurse thanked him and she gave him a wipe for his hands. He cleaned up and tossed the wipe in the biohazard trash bin. For only a second, Tony locked his gaze on Steve’s and then went back to Clint.

Bruce considered them and then said, “I talked to Wong about roles and such. One of the things he
said was that sometimes during injuries bonds get a little raw. I’m not sure exactly what he meant by that but I think it must be something similar to what you experienced with Clint.”

“Like the body and spirit didn’t recognize one another anymore,” Steve said as Tony added, “The soul is raw energy, not grounded.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Bruce smiled. “Yeah I think that has to be it. So as the Healer of the pack – this is my job, Steve. You need to be here to finalize the bond I would think, but I have to bring Clint’s astral projection back to his body so to speak.”

“Oh you know how to do that?” Tony asked.

Bruce sighed and tucked his glasses in the chest pocket of his lab coat. “I guess we’ll see.”

“Do you think it’s safe to try again so soon?” Cho asked as she checked the heart monitor.

Tony pointed to the screen she looked at. “Is he stable? Any medical reasons not to try?”

“Not according to our monitors. But he was agitated and awake before the Captain tried. And now,” Cho said as she looked down at Clint’s inert form.

“We could wait,” Steve suggested. If it put Clint in any more danger, then Steve thought it would be a good idea to wait it out. At the same time, the idea that Clint’s soul was literally ripping itself apart ratcheted up Steve’s fears. “But what I experienced… it wasn’t good.”

“Let’s do this then,” Bruce said with a lot of confidence that the soul bonds didn’t support. He shrugged. “Sometimes I gotta act like I can do it for the big guy to keep at a distance.”

That didn’t sound all that inspiring, but Steve took it at face value as Tony dodged another direct look by stepping to the side. “I’ll just wait for all hell to break loose over here.”

Bruce glared at Tony but then stepped to the side of Clint’s bed. “Are you ready?”

Cho had joined Tony away from the bed, and Steve stood on the opposite side. “Yeah I’m ready.”

He rubbed his hands on his pants. “I think.”

“Lots of confidence there,” Tony muttered, and this time Steve threw him a sour look.

Shaking off Tony’s negativity, Steve faced Bruce and said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Well, I’m the Healer and Wong has given me a few pointers on healing what he called Fractures. I’m going to assume this is one of them,” Bruce said and then peered over his shoulder at Tony. “I’m going to need you to monitor things. If they get too wild, I need you to pull us back.”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?” Tony asked and crossed his arms over his chest. Not only his body language, everything about the man screamed closed and hurt. Steve had to brace himself just to look at Tony.

“It means that I need you to throw us a line,” Bruce said and then closed off Tony’s protests by focusing back on Steve again. “Let’s try this. Follow my lead.” He bobbed his shoulders up and down, as if he was loosening up before a big sporting event.

From the back corner, Tony said, “You sure about this?” It wasn’t in attack mode.

“Not really,” Bruce said and gave a weak smile.
Steve suppressed the urge to whip out his Captain America voice and lecture Bruce, especially since he didn’t know what or how to do any of this. He swallowed down his qualms and nodded.

Bruce went quiet then – not only in the room but in his soul. It surprised Steve to know how absolutely silent and still Bruce could become considering he harbored an angry monster inside of him. Steve eased into the bond, trailing behind Bruce yet the waters were nearly calm. Nothing moved, no sound disrupted the stillness. The souls around him were like a sheet of glass, perfectly flat, noiseless, and undisturbed. Steve allowed the low energy to cover him as he sank into its midst.

Bruce spoke but Steve didn’t know if it was out loud or through the bond. “I’m going to open it up now. Stay a beat away. The fracture is up ahead.”

Steve detected another presence not far from him, but not touching. He reached out only to check and found Tony’s soul a pulse away. Bruce shifted their souls, using their energy to shore up his own as he started to peel back the façade of silence. The dark waters around them lifted away only to reveal the tendrils like vipers thrashing about seeking freedom. This was Clint’s soul, corrupted by the broken bond, trying desperately to set itself free from its link to the mortal realm.

Steve hung back as did Tony, though he stayed closer. As Bruce stretched out with the lengths of his soul’s energy, Steve lent his own. He offered a foundation, built it and strengthened it. It was his job as the leader of the pack to offer assistance where he could. In the very near distance, Tony wandered a pulse, a beat apart as if he tested the waters but could not make the final decision to jump in. Non-plussed by Tony’s hesitation, Steve strove forward with Bruce as he struggled with the webbings of the chaotic soul before them.

That’s when Steve glimpsed it, the horrible reckoning of a fractured soul as it battled the tether holding it to Earth. It sought to be consumed by the ever increasing dark void around them. Steve shuddered in its cold presence and then he heard a muted howl and realized it was Clint begging to live, to survive. This was his fault again. He rushed forward but then something, a bond, caught him and held him back from Bruce’s work. It felt like someone clasped him around his chest, keeping him back as Bruce wove the energies together, getting the crests to synchronize even as the tendrils whipped about trying for release. In a final heave, the purpled soul lurked away, trying to spread out its energies so that Bruce couldn’t possibly knot them together.

It was then everything changed for all of them. Bruce took one look at Steve – in the astral dimension or the real one Steve did not know – and a green flash hinted across his eyes and face. He smirked and then turned back to the rebellious soul. An image of Bruce and the Hulk superimposed against one another and then the Hulk howled out his anger and the energies trembled, the chords shifting together in a tight knot with the pack.

Clint screeched as Steve opened his eyes as the threads of his soul wove into the pack and that thing— that dark presence dissipated into the turbid background of the abyss outside all souls.

The word came all at once.

“Sentinel,” Steve said. His knees gave out unexpectedly and he dropped to the floor, banging his forehead against the gurney. Tony was next to him with his hand on Steve’s shoulder. Steve looked up to find Bruce standing there or the Hulk – a mix of both of them and then he settled back to the mild mannered doctor again.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked.

Bruce only nodded and turned back to the patient. Tony squeezed Steve’s shoulder. “How about you, Cap? You okay?”
Steve shuddered as if a cold wind hit him hard in the face, but the air warmed and he gasped out, “Yeah. Just give me a minute.”

“Steve?” It was Clint.

Steve didn’t move, he just sat on the floor. “Yeah?” He peered up at gurney.

“Weren’t we on a train?”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah, we were.”

“Is this good, is it?” Clint asked.

“Is now,” Steve said and went to get to his feet. Tony stepped back as if being too close to Steve might forgive everything that had taken place between them. “It’s fine now.” Steve went to open Clint’s bindings. He eyed Bruce. “You need a minute?”

“Yeah, I think I do.” His voice tremored as he spoke. Steve looked at Tony and, unspoken, Tony understood the request. He grabbed Bruce’s arm and ushered him out of the hospital room.

Once freed, Clint sat up and cradled his head in his hands. “What the hell happened? I feel worse than the post-Loki crap.”

“Well, I tried to bring you into the soul pack while we were on the train,” Steve answered. “And we were interrupted by a train derailment and a couple of strange people that seem to be Hydra based.”

“Lovely,” Clint said as he looked up at Steve.

“And because it happened while I tried the bond, well, it split or something. Bruce had to repair it,” Steve said. He tried not to dwell on what he had seen, the astral projection of Clint shredded and splintered until Bruce mended it. Would it hold? Would it shatter again? That terrified Steve. “It’s been a day, and you said you had plans to fly home?”

“Oh shit, yeah,” Clint said and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Oh crap. I’m a little dizzy,” Clint said. “Is that from the bond or something else?”

“Maybe, I don’t know,” Steve said. “We need to get you into some training as soon as possible. I can get Wong or Doctor Strange to help—.”

“Or I can help out,” Bruce said as he entered the small hospital room. Although his eyes showed a weariness, he offered a calming influence by his presence and the vibrations of his soul.

“Bruce,” Steve said. “Are you okay now?”

Bruce lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Good as can be expected. Nat and I have been working on calming techniques for the Hulk. Seems to work.”

“Always good to know,” Steve replied. “Thank you for what you did for Clint. For what you did for the pack. That wasn’t easy.” The images like phantoms hung close to the living.

“I guess I’m starting to understand what it means to be Healer, and why the other guy is important as well,” Bruce said and retrieved his glasses from his shirt pocket.

“It’s good because we also have more members that will probably need your help.” Steve said. “It seems the pack is something more now. It’s changing. For years it was just you, me, and Nat. Peggy a bit. Now we have Tony, Sam, Clint, Bucky – and that man and woman who attacked the train.”
“Odd selection, those two,” Bruce said. “Are we planning on being the bad guys?”

Cho, who must have been in the room all along, let out a little gasp, but with the glares from Bruce, Clint, and Steve, she excused herself and left the room.

“At this point, I don’t know what’s going on. We have to get this under control and that’s one of the reasons I came to New York,” Steve said. “We have the core Avengers, except for Thor who I think is still off planet. I don’t know. I don’t even know if the whole soul pack thing will work with him. But we have to – I have to get more of this under control.”

“So far, not so good,” Bruce said.

“Yeah I have to admit, a lot of this is my fault. I spent the last two years-.”

Clint interrupted him. “Trying to acclimate?” He swung his legs over the side of the gurney. “We all seem to forget that you were frozen just two years ago and missed a crap load of stuff. Give yourself a break, Cap.”

“Should you be getting up?” Steve said and placed a hand on Clint’s shoulder. “You just-.” He stopped. He didn’t want to talk about what he’s experienced, especially not if it would eat away at Clint’s newfound confidence.

“I gotta make a phone call,” Clint said and ignored Steve’s worried glance at Bruce. Clint hopped off of the gurney and immediately wavered on his feet. Bruce held him up so he wouldn’t fall over.

“What is all that crazy ass noise in my head?”

“You and all of us,” Bruce replied. “You have to get the Mantra in your head.”

“I think we should get Wong over here for a meeting,” Steve added. It wasn’t just an idea but a declaration, a pronouncement.

Bruce convinced Clint to get back in bed if he got him a phone. Clint asked for some privacy and they left him. While they stood out in the hallway, silence descended and Steve flinched at it. In a low voice he asked, “What was that?”

“What do you mean?” Bruce wasn’t looking at Steve but at the far windows and Manhattan.

“In the soul bond?” Steve asked. “That – darkness?” He swallowed back his fear at the feeling, at losing Clint.

“I’m not an expert, but it wasn’t good. We were pretty close to losing Clint.” Bruce bowed his head and then looked up at Steve. “He doesn’t seem to remember and that’s probably a good thing.”

“I don’t know. I’m concerned.” The dark abyss lurked.

“I’ll talk with Wong about it, but it’s because of the fracture, probably. From what Wong taught me, a fracture causes the astral projection to severe from the astral dimension and if I had to guess it causes a kind of black hole in the soul that eats up the soul’s energy.”

“God, that does not sound good,” Steve said and cringed at his own voice.

“No,” Bruce said and pinched the bridge of his nose. “But we got him back and repaired it. That’s all that matters.”

“I hope so,” Steve said. “I’m getting in touch with Wong as soon as possible to plan a meeting. Now
that most of us are in New York. It’s time.”

“Nat should be back soon,” Bruce replied. “I got a call earlier today.”

“Great, then it’s settled. We’ll get this pack in shape.”

As soon as Steve was able to, he contacted Strange and asked if it would be possible for Wong to come to the Tower. The situation couldn’t be ignored anymore and needed to take front and center stage.

It took some haranguing with Strange, but Steve finally scheduled a visit with Wong. He would come over to the Tower and meet with the entire pack, help them work through the issues, and possibly give guidance to the next steps. He also needed to confront Tony again. He knew the next day that it wouldn’t be enough time to process everything that had happened. From being added to a pack without his consent to having learned his parents’ death wasn’t an accident the last few weeks had been a roller coaster ride. Worse than Coney Island as far as Steve was concerned.

On top of everything else that had gone wrong with his interaction with Tony, Steve had to fess up to the fact he’d been dealing with inappropriate thoughts and dreams about his team member. Before he’d seen Tony to reveal the awful truth about Bucky, Steve had woken up from a vibrant and realistic dream of sucking off Tony. It startled him enough that he stumbled to the shower and found himself sobbing for relief from his thick and heavy hard on. He didn’t want to touch himself. He begged for the cold water to provide him with the shock needed to make it subside. But it didn’t work.

He’d stood there in the shower, hoping and praying but there was no God in this universe that wouldn’t see his sin. He shuddered against it. Tried to will his cock down. Instead unbidden images of Tony before him, sitting with his head thrown back and his mouth open as Steve swallowed him down, as Steve tasted him, as Steve felt the curvature of his cock in his mouth. And then Tony had grabbed his head and thrust, thrust so deep and powerfully that Steve had wanted to cup his balls, had wanted to finger his ass, had wanted to flip him over and fuck him.

In the shower, Steve had relented. He confessed to the Father Almighty that he was a deviant, that he was a pervert. He was a frail, broken human. He took himself in hand and thought of Tony, only Tony. There had never been another man he thought of like that. He thought of having him on the bed, of entering him, of Tony bending his back and looking over his shoulder so that Steve could kiss him as he pounded into Tony’s ass. He thought of cupping his hand around Tony, around his neck, enough that it secured them together, but also risked the consequences. He thought of how he wanted to spill into Tony, hot and wet. And then he shoved hard into his own hand and orgasmed long and deep until he fell to his knees in the shower. He’d sinned.

As the water hit him, Steve closed his eyes and tried to pretend he didn’t want to sin again. But he wanted to – he needed to. “Beloved,” he had said and cursed himself. He washed up that morning and put it behind him. He needed to. There was no other way. Refocus, he told himself. He was the team leader. He had no other choice. Want and hunger were human frailties. He was a leader of a pack. He needed to narrow his energies to his team and his pack for the betterment of the world.

Hence, Steve found himself standing at the entrance to Tony’s workshop again. He waited as JARVIS announced him. Tony had his back to Steve as he worked at something small and intricate on the bench. In actuality, Steve supposed he could reach out and kind of poke him with his mind, but that just seemed rude. Especially since the idea just brought up crude images to mind.

Tony turned around as JARVIS told him that Captain Rogers awaited entrance. For a second, it looked like Tony might throw something at Steve, but instead he gestured and the door unlocked.
Steve pulled it opened. As he stepped in, Steve said, “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

Tony shrugged. “I’m kind of stuck with you, considering you are my soul bonded Beloved or whatever. Am I Beloved for the whole company? I mean does the whole pack think of me that way?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “But you are specifically my Beloved.”

“Wow,” Tony said as he placed the pieces of metal and computer boards to the side. “That was fast and decisive. Like you don’t even have to think about it.”

“It was in the reading,” Steve replied and knew how that sounded. He hissed to himself.

“Oh, so you did the homework this time,” Tony said and closed his arms around himself. Scratching absentely at his beard, he asked, “So what’s the occasion?”

“I wanted to check in on you. I realize that the other day was tough for you,” Steve said and he watched as Tony narrowed his eyes as if he had a microscope and tried to discern Steve’s inner workings. “This is all a mess. I’ll give you that, but you have to come into it with an open mind.”

Tony twisted his mouth like he bit into a lemon. “Right, an open mind. Like that will work with the idea that someone who is Brother is my parents’ killer. You do remember that part.”

“Could you at least attend a session I set up with Strange and Wong? They’re coming to talk to us about the chaos of our pack and to help us order it.”

Again, Tony’s eyes went to slits as he glared at Steve. “Order? What do you mean by order?”

“Just to help out figure out what’s going on, why it’s building the way it is,” Steve said and clasped his hands together. He tried to look non-threatening. “Please.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” Tony answered. “When?”

“Eight tomorrow morning.”

“God, you really do hate me,” Tony hissed.

“I don’t- I-.” Steve stopped. “Okay it’s early but they want to spend a good three hours to start. They might stay for another session on Friday. If that’s okay?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t that be okay,” Tony said and threw his hands up. “Invite the whole damned cult of sorcerers. I don’t care.” He went back to his workbench, his whole manner obviously telling Steve to leave.

For a moment, Steve hesitated. He glimpsed the beautiful markings on his arm, the one that traveled the length of his arm and went up and under his shirt – the Beloved mark. It should be something joyous, something to celebrate. Even if they were not romantically involved, it meant that Steve not only had a team, but a family. He turned, going to the door. Stopping, Steve peered over this shoulder at Tony. He wanted to say something, explain – anything. The words desiccated in his mouth, dry like ash. Why couldn’t he talk to the man?

Instead of staying, Steve left and spent the rest of the day making arrangements for the whole pack sans Peggy to attend the meeting tomorrow morning. It meant getting Sam to New York City. It wasn’t a difficult task, but he felt like he was intruding on his friend’s daily life.
“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take the late train,” Sam said. “I’ll be there tonight. I expect pizza.”

“You’ve got it,” Steve said and pressed the disconnect after they said their farewells. At least when Sam arrived Steve felt a little more at home. It wasn’t that Steve took Tony’s hospitality lightly at all. The fact that Tony designed floors – apartments – for each of the team members overwhelmed him. Each of the floors had the best technology, yet like his floor, it was designed to make each person feel comfortable. Steve’s apartment had all the bells and whistles but everything had been reconfigured and camouflaged to look like something out of the forties, from the microwave to the television. Sure the television was a flatscreen and huge, but the little wood frame around it with the gold rimming reminded Steve of his radio back in the day.

It was thoughtful yet why couldn’t Steve say anything to Tony, express his thankfulness and appreciation. Every time he interacted with Tony it turned into a match of wills instead of a normal conversation.

Even Sam whistled in disbelief at the design and layout of the apartment. “He really got you down to a T.”

Steve glanced around his living room with the high backed chairs and the phonograph that not only played what they called vinyl these days, but also doubled as a MP3 player, a CD player, and a smart access point for the entire apartment.

“Look at that television!” Sam smiled as he stepped in front of the large screen and shook his head. “It looks like something designed out of the 40s but with today’s tech!”

“I think that’s exactly what it is,” Steve said. “Pizza and beer okay?”

“Sure,” Sam said. “He must really like you.”

Steve laughed. “Oh, don’t get too impressed. He made up Natasha’s floor with a lot of Russian decorations.” He pulled out plates for the pizza. “I wonder what he did for Thor’s floor?”

Sam only shook his head and glided right over Steve’s comment. “So how’d it go with the Bucky reveal?” Sam said as he made himself comfortable on the couch next to the high backs. He sipped his beer and nodded thanks as Steve gave him a plate with a pile of slices on it. Sam’s eyebrows went up. “You know I’m not a super soldier. Two – three tops is my limit.”

Steve sat down on the couch, his plate heaping with pizza slices. “The Bucky reveal went horribly.” He put the plate on the coffee table. “Tony doesn’t like the idea of having Bucky as a pack mate – sounds like we are all dogs – someone who killed his parents.”

“Bucky wasn’t in his right mind.” Sam chose a slice and began to eat.

“I said that – it did not sink in,” Steve said. He placed the food on the coffee table. “The thing is I can understand a bit of where he’s coming from. If I found out my parents had been killed by someone I had to have a close relationship with, I think I would be upset as well.”

“Would you?” Sam said. “Or would you take into account if that person was brainwashed?”

“That’s not fair. I can’t answer that question, Sam.”

“Maybe not, but maybe you can give a little more information to Stark about who Bucky is,” Sam said. “Sure we all know the war stories and that you were best friends and all, but there has to be a reason he’s been chosen as Brother. I suggest you share that.”
“I don’t think that was my doing,” Steve said. Otherwise, if it was, then Steve would have to come face to face with the fact that he chose Tony – a man – for his Beloved.

“It might be the universe, but it has to be dependent on you. It’s not random, not how I understand it.”

That was disturbing. Steve had to admit though it made more sense than a chaotic mess of just anyone. “But it doesn’t make sense that I identified those people who attacked the train as part of the pack. Maybe something’s wrong with me? With the bonding process?”

“Well,” Sam said as he reached for his beer. “We’ll find out a little tomorrow, right?”

“I hope so.”

It had been good to talk to Sam. The adoration Sam had for him diminished and their friendship grounded in reality. If anything, the universe had gotten it right when Sam had been designated as Companion. While Steve could confide in both Natasha and Sam, there was an ease with Sam that brought about a good feeling, a sense of camaraderie. When Steve went to bed that night, he felt as if tomorrow and the meeting with Wong would prove fruitful, if only Tony would open his ears to listen.

As he lie in bed, he missed his old flat in Brooklyn – not the one SHIELD had rented for him, but the one he’d shared with his mother. On sleepless nights, he could listen to the calls of his neighbors below, the honk of horns, and the noise of life. Occasionally, the rain would patter against the panes and would lull him to sleep.

“You always liked the rain.”

Steve turned over in the bed to stare out of the window of that long ago apartment. Curled next to him, Tony whispered in to the dark. For some reason, the thought of Tony in his bed didn’t upset him. Not in this dream state.

“How do you know I like the rain?” Steve asked. Tony and Steve had never spoken about likes and dislikes. They’d only gone for each other’s throats. When he thought of that fact, it only served to sadden him. The chances they’d missed.

“The rain? Well, I hope I’ll know,” Tony said and moved to face Steve, but the shadows concealed his features.

“Maybe someday,” Steve said and leaned down to kiss him. Right now, it didn’t feel wrong or misguided or even filled with the devil. Kissing Tony felt right. “Beloved.”

Tony caressed the hand on his face. “You think someday we’ll get to this? You think someday we’ll love one another?”

Steve smiled. “I don’t know if I can. Tony, you don’t want me like that.”

Tony frowned, but the pain in his eyes spoke not of disappointment, but fear and confusion. “Why shouldn’t I?” Was it a challenge or an offer?

“Shared life experiences. What do we have to share?” Steve asked.

Tony chuckled a little and then slid over onto Steve’s chest as if they had done this a thousand times. Maybe they had – in dreams. “It’s not always about shared life experiences. If it was, I’d have no one. I mean, how many people do you know that grew up as wealthy and smart? Plus on top of that
ended up abducted and nearly killed. It’s not about similar lives, Steve. It’s about shared souls.”

“You don’t sound like the Tony I know,” Steve returned as he stroked a hand through Tony’s hair.

“Maybe I’m not. Maybe I’m just the soul or the astral projection of Tony. Do you think astral projections are confined by time and space? Maybe not, maybe I’m a Tony from the future.” Tony placed his hand on Steve’s bare chest. “Now, shh, I want to listen to your heart.”

Could it possibly be? Could Steve accept this – this relationship? A relationship based on everything he learned that was wrong. Except maybe he didn’t learn it was wrong. He recalled across the hall of the tenement house he shared with his mother. He remembered the pair of bachelors. Their small apartment was across the hall. A one bedroom tucked in the back of the building. Most renters of the building accepted the idea that one of the bachelors slept on the couch and the other slept in the bedroom. During the Great Depression people did what they could to survive, sharing a meal, sharing a flat. The men across the hall were survivors. Or were they?

His mother had been kind to them. On a Christmas Eve, she invited them over and shared the thick stew and big, chunky bread rolls she’d made. They all ate until their bellies ached and sang Christmas Carols afterward. His mother brought out a pie and they cut it and ate it. They didn’t have a tree that year, since it was a tree or food. Yet the young men sharing a flat knocked on their door the next day – Christmas Day – with a tree. It had been theirs, but they insisted that little Stevie have a tree. He smiled at them and still remembered the way they had smiled at one another – so happy – so joyful – and with so much love.

Steve hadn’t recognized it then, not at all. Until this moment, reconsidering his life he hadn’t known the truth of the young bachelors. His mother must have known, and still she invited them to dinner. It wasn’t revelation, but maybe his eyes opened a little more as he considered his life. A life lived in a different time, but time moves on and people change. Understandings evolve. Was he right to cling to something once ingrained in him, or was he foolish not to move forward and accept his life as it was right now?

His heart beat a rhythm in his chest, pounding until he thought he might gasp for breath. The idea of losing his identity hit him. How could he?

Now, shh, I want to listen to your heart

The words echoed in his head, revolving around and around much like the Soul Mantra. Yet, Tony wasn’t lying on Steve’s bare chest. He wasn’t wrapped around Steve in his bed in that old flat in Brooklyn. Steve rested alone in his room in the Tower and several floors up, Tony resided. Close. Steve rolled to his side. What happened to his sanity? Since he woke up he fought aliens, found out there was a new thing called soul packs because some magician (Magic was real!) played around with time, fought Hydra again, and ended up with a Beloved who was a man. He closed his eyes again and willed sleep to come, but was it because he was tired or he wanted to enter that dreamscape again?

He was fooling himself if he thought that the Tony in his dreams might be anything like the Tony in reality. The real Tony wouldn’t be understanding, wouldn’t get that it was hard for Steve to accept the idea that he might just be attracted to a man. He would snark and bitch at Steve, belittle him for his narrow mindedness. But where did the Tony in his dreams come from?

By the time he accepted there was no real answer, the sun had risen and he was staring out at the gleaming mountains of Manhattan. Brooklyn faded away but the feeling of Tony in his arms lingered. Getting a shower and shave saved him from having to think about the blissful feeling he had – just lying there with a man in his arms, nuzzling and being close. He rinsed away the feeling,
shaved and prepped for his meeting. He dressed and then went to the kitchen to find Sam already frying eggs in a pan.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Sam said.

“Hey, you want to make breakfast anytime I have no problem,” Steve said. “As I recall you’re pretty good at that.”

“I dated a woman a while back that loved breakfast. It was her favorite meal. I think all we ever ate was breakfast foods. I got a lot of practice,” Sam said. “Over easy, right?”

“Yes, please.” Steve prepared the toast and then chopped up some melon for a fruit dish. “You know, Tony had this whole place stocked when I came. I mean everything. It was like he was waiting for me to show up.”

“Well, you guys are Beloved and all that,” Sam said. He didn’t look at Steve as he spoke. “He was probably waiting for you to get your head out of your ass.”

“That’s not nice, Sam,” Steve said as he put the melon in two bowls.

Sam cocked an eyebrow at Steve. “I know it’s not what your 40s mentality says should happen, but it’s what happened. It has to mean something.”

“I don’t know?” Steve said as he poured the coffee.

Sam put the plates of eggs and toast on the table as Steve collected the folks, knives, and butter. They both settled in for breakfast. Sam shrugged. “I got the sense from you this morning you were more at peace with it, but now I’m getting these herky jerky vibes.”

“Herky jerky?” Steve lowered his head and stared at his coffee. He had to admit. Sam read him like a book. Glancing up, Steve said, “I have these amazingly real dreams. But they aren’t real. They take place in the 30s and 40s, you know. Tony’s there in the dreams.” He stopped. He wasn’t about to confess the erotic parts of his dreams. “It always feels right. I don’t know how to explain it, other than that.”

“So you’re telling me that Tony feels like home to you,” Sam said as he stabbed his egg, making the yolk run. He sopped it up with a slice of toast.

The dawning might have blinded him if it had been any brighter. “Wow, I didn’t -. I hadn’t thought about that.”

Sam dunked the toast in the egg yolk. “It’s all about the symbolism in dreams. Not what’s actually happening.”

“So you know a lot about dreams?” Steve asked as he dug into his breakfast.

“Well, remember that woman I dated? She was a seer. She could tell your fortune and she also made mean omelet.”

“Fortune and omelet. I can’t see why you ever let her get away,” Steve said.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Sam winked. “Who said I let her get away.” He placed his hand on his chest. “When she had this gorgeous hunk of sweet chocolate? Ah, she was the one who let me get away.”
“And you’re saying I shouldn’t let Tony get away?” Steve finished up the eggs and munch on the extra slices of buttered toast. “If you remember, we can’t really get away from one another.”

“But you could make your lives a living hell.”

“Well, there is that,” Steve agreed.

He supposed half of his pent up anxiety centered on his own disgust or dislike of the idea that he might be attracted to Tony. Living with the possibility over the past few weeks wasn’t going to transform him instantly to a liberated gay man. But he had to admit that the idea of denying it felt more like pretending to be something he wasn’t. He had a lot of experience with that back in the day. How many times did he think he could take a bully down only to find himself face first in puddle in an alley way? He understood denial.

When Sam and Steve took the elevator to the conference floor, Steve found himself jittery and nervous. He felt like he stepped back into those 1940s draft rooms, trying to get someone to allow him into the Army. Sam raised a brow at him and smiled. It wasn’t something that Steve could interpret on the best of days. Entering the conference room floor, Steve surveyed his surroundings. It surprised him. Nothing about it felt like a conference room, not like the SHIELD rooms or the briefing rooms he sat in during his time in the Army. This was something different entirely. It looked more like a living room but with a large low sitting table in the center that had a round half globe set in the middle of it. It was all chrome and glass with comfortable orange leather chairs spaced around the center table. Tony already sat in one of the orange chairs as did Bruce. Next to Bruce was Natasha who Steve greeted with a hug and a slight kiss to her cheek. It was good to see her again even though her soul bled a kind of loss to him.

Steve nodded a greeting to the rest of the team and then introduced Sam – even though he was pretty sure that it already happened in DC. Some of his memory was disturbingly fuzzy from the time he spent in the hospital. Clint entered the room and sat next to Steve. Clint looked better as if he hadn’t been laid up due to some metaphysical ailment of his soul just a few days ago.

Steve wanted to inquire when Wong and Strange would show up, so he plucked his phone from his pocket to check on them just as they invited themselves into the conference room. Strange swept in like a hurricane while Wong stayed quieter with more of an inner rage waiting to be unleashed – at least that’s the way Steve always interpreted his glower.

“So, I hear there is trouble in paradise?” Strange said and his cloak whispered around him as if it had a life of its own.

“Depends on what you call paradise, doesn’t it?” Tony answered and generally gave off an air of disgust and annoyance.

Steve tried not to let the remark color his association of this meeting with its possible outcomes. Impossible dreams seemed to be his forte. With the lingering memories of his dream last night, Steve hoped that he could at least start mending fences. He might not be able to give Tony the kind of relationship he wanted, but he could at least extend an olive branch. “Doctor Strange, Wong,” Steve said and inwardly winced. He still didn’t know how to address Wong – was it Mister? Sorcerer? Something else? No one told him and he felt on unsteady footing all the time. “We asked you both here to give us more guidance on how the soul pack and the members should interact. There’s been some -.” He stopped and adjusted his wording. “Disagreements on how some members should be accepted or not.”

Tony made a small huffing noise as Natasha only frowned at him.
“We have some other members of the pack who aren’t here,” Steve said.

“We know of Agent Carter,” Wong replied. He folded his hands in front of him and reminded Steve of one of the nuns from his primary school days.

“Well, we have a whole new crew of members mainly made up of homicidal maniacs.” Tony dared Steve with those cunningly brilliant eyes to refute his statement.

This was not going to go the way Steve planned. He clenched his teeth, breathed in through his nose, and then released it. Sam eyed him with a look that told him patience. Steve relented. “Tony does make a point.”

“I do?” Tony sat up from his lounging position. “I do.”

“Yes, we have three new members who have been manipulated by Hydra to be their tools,” Steve said.

“Well, that’s not exactly-.” Tony started, but then Maria Hill walked into the conference room from a side corridor, surprising Steve. He hadn’t invited her and didn’t know whether he should ask her to leave or if someone (Tony?) had requested she attend.

“It looks fairly close to the truth though,” Maria said. She clutched a tablet in her hand and went directly to Tony. She placed it on the table in front of him and then took a seat to the side and not in the main circle.

Tony bent forward and grabbed the tablet.

Strange had both hands to his temples. “Let’s start from the beginning, shall we?”

Steve could handle that. “I’m the leader, but you already knew that. Bruce is the Healer of the group. Nat is in the position of Confidant while Sam here is our Companion. Clint has the classic position of Sentinel. Peggy, who is now in London, is our Guide. Tony is Beloved.” Strange quirked a brow at Steve but didn’t comment. “We have three more members. Bucky Barnes is Brother, and the two others-.”

“Names are Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, twins,” Maria supplied and then zipped her mouth closed as Strange scowled.

“Are simply Family.” Steve ignored the sorcerer and asked, “Do we know anything more about them?”

“He’s got increased metabolism and improved homeostasis. Her thing is neuro-electric interfacing and telekinesis, mental manipulation.” Maria gave a little shrug. “He’s fast and she’s weird.”

“Any intel on who the older man was at the train attack?” Steve asked.

“A man named Baron Wolfgang von Strucker,” Maria answered and pointed to the tablet. “Some intel puts him in Eastern Europe during the last of the Cold War, even in North Korea after that. More recent intel links him to Sokovia and some small cells of what might actually be Hydra. There was a small covert SHIELD operation there.”

“Covert as in Hydra,” Steve said. “And how do the twins fit in?”

“Are we here for an Avengers meeting or for a meeting of the soul pack?” Strange jumped in, his irritation tainting his voice.
“I’m sorry,” Tony said and glared at him. “But neither of those groups you’re actually a part of so-.”

Steve put his hand up. “I’m sorry, Doctor Strange.” He paused to glance at Tony who wasn’t pleased at Steve’s handling of the sorcerer. “But it is important for us to figure out why these twins were named to be part of our pack.”

“For the same reason, your friend was named,” Wong said and stepped up to the circle of chairs. “Each soul pack has a resonance. You come together as a pack or group of like souls. As the bonds develop you enrich the pack. Your friend, Barnes is it?” Steve nodded. “He is much like you, Captain Rogers. He may need help to regain himself, but whatever transgressions he committed while under the influence of Hydra should not dissuade any in the pack from welcoming him.”

Purposefully, Steve kept his focus on Wong and Strange. He didn’t want to see the dark shadows over Tony’s features. “And the twins have a similar situation?”

Maria answered, “They were victims in a war several years ago, leaving them orphaned and living on the streets. From what we can gather from the SHIELD data dump -.” Hill glanced Natasha’s way for a second and then turned back to Steve. “They were recruited by SHIELD – but it was really Hydra probably. For experiments.”

“Experiments.” Steve closed his eyes and stilled the memories. Wanting to help his fellow Americans, wanting to save the world from a mad man. “Let me guess.” He opened his eyes. “Sokovia was devastated and they were enticed by the opportunity to help change things for the better.”

“Still nuts to volunteer for Strucker’s experiments.”

Steve smirked. "Right. What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them to protect their country?"

“Can we proceed with the reason we are here?” Strange asked. His cape jittered as if the wind hit it. Steve surveyed the rest of the group. Every member of the pack felt more like the Avengers than a close knit family, but he guessed part of being an Avenger should be like it was when he was with the Howling Commandoes. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“Aw, you almost sounded modern, Cap,” Clint said with a laugh. Sam joined in.

“So each one of you and your missing members have an assignment, a designation as it were,” Strange said. “That designation not only works for the interaction with the leader of the pack but also with others. Except of course for the Beloved. That designation seals completely around the leader.”

“What does that mean, exactly? I mean because the old guy in the room,” Tony said as he pointed to Steve. “Is a bit of a homophobic ass, so I don’t see – well I don’t think I’ll be seeing much of his ass.” Before Steve can interject to defend himself, Tony raced on. “And by the way, Barnes is not a saint. He killed my parents. So I’m not inclined to have him as my Brother anytime soon. So no, you can all kiss my ass. Fury didn’t want me to be part of his boy band and I have to agree.” Tony climbed to his feet. “You can let yourselves out of my conference room.”

Strange stepped right into Tony’s path. “You play with fire and don’t know that the flame burns.”

Steve got up from his seat to intervene but Tony laughed at Strange. “I heard you were a famous surgeon and now you go around in a cape and act as if you’re some hocus pocus wizard. Hogwarts and Harry Potter land is down in Orlando.”
“If you insist on being ignorant, then I suppose I will have to teach you a lesson.” Even as he spoke, Strange put his one hand out and started a circular motion with his other hand. Sparks of gold fanned out. “Wong, if you please?”

Steve warded off Strange. “I don’t know what you’re planning on doing, but I asked you here for guidance. Nothing more.”

“And that is what you will get,” Strange said and gave a small nod.

In seconds, the golden energy spread and opened into—Steve didn’t understand it. He heard Tony say something along the lines of hey, is that a portal before they were both pushed through it by a surprisingly strong Wong and then the whole thing shut down. They had fallen on the opposite side of the portal, in a small room that looked like a place that might have been built sometime in the middle ages.

“What?” Steve said. Sometimes the future really tried his patience.

Tony stood up and dusted off his jeans. He glanced around the room, peering out the windows. The windows were glass so maybe it wasn’t middle age construction. It was decidedly cold in the room and Steve couldn’t find one modern fixture – nothing to indicate it had any kind of heating system, except for the fireplace. The place – or wood cabin (because that’s what it seemed to be) – was a single room with a stone fireplace, a stool near the fireplace, a kettle and a pot sat on the floor, and a bed or what could be both a bed and a place to sit. That was tucked in the one corner of the room. The door to the outside opened to what looked like a mountain wilderness with a substantial amount of snow all around them. Neither of them were dressed for a march down the mountain side. Spotting a pile of chopped wood to the side of the cabin, Steve hurried out, gathered some, and brought an arm load into the cabin.

“What? You’re getting yourself comfortable?” Tony said as he curled his arms around his chest trying to stay warm. He still hadn’t moved from the center of the cabin. “I am not going to stand this.”

Steve dumped the load of wood next to the fireplace. “It’s freezing in here and I don’t see Strange anywhere to get us out.” The fury boiled through the bond. Steve couldn’t blame Tony for his anger. Getting dumped in the middle of nowhere had not been part of Steve’s hopes for the team lessons.

“Well, I can tell you one thing. This is not going to be us cuddling in the single bed to stay warm. That’s for sure. I’m getting us out of here,” Tony said and marched to the door. He flung it open to a gust of wind that blasted both cold air and snow into the tiny cabin. “Shit!” He slammed the door closed. “What the fuck does he expect us to do?”

“Talk it out?” Steve said and shrugged. He swept out the ashes from the hearth and stacked the wood. Searching around the mantle he found a box of matches. It took a little doing without a good amount of kindling and the wood was slightly wet from the snow, but he managed to get the fire going. “Should get warm soon.”

“Regular mountain man, huh?” Tony commented as he lingered a few feet away from the fireplace. Steve poked at the fire with the iron. “Once, when I was growing up we had this little tiny house. Only time I lived in a house, but we couldn’t’ always afford the coal, so sometimes we just used wood in the pot belly stove we had. Learned how then.”

“Oh.” The single syllable resounded through the bond with shame and embarrassment.
Steve peered over his shoulder at Tony but he stood in the dark so that his features were hidden. “We moved out and got a nice flat with radiator heat.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Tony said, his voice low. “Try and make me feel better about your living situation compared to mine. I know I was lucky, fortunate. I know others aren’t.” Tony stepped into the light. A mixture of emotions filtered over his face. Before Steve replied, Tony shifted the conversation. “This must be an illusion or something. I bet the rest of the team is sitting there watching and laughing their asses off at us.” He wrapped his arms around his chest. “This is not nice.”

“Well, I’m assuming Strange had a plan,” Steve said. Otherwise, Steve might lose his temper and punch Strange the next time he saw the guy. Steve inhaled and exhaled, trying to calm his frustration. The plan had been to learn as a team, to figure out how to work as a team, not to be sectioned off with Tony. Tony – who so obviously loathed him and didn’t trust him. Steve sat on the stool next to the fireplace. He needed to reach out and show he was willing to try with Tony. He gestured for Tony to join him near the fire. “Come on, he’s not going to leave us here for too long. He must have some plan.”

Tony came to the fire, putting his hands out to warm them. It was still a little more smoky than warming but Steve moved the logs to create more air pockets for the fire.

Tony said, “He’s not a genius. Not like I am, you know.”

“I heard he was one of the top surgeons in the world until his accident.”

“Well, aren’t you up on things,” Tony said but Steve didn’t hear the normal sarcasm in his voice.

Staring into the flames as the smoke settled and the fire blazed, Steve said, “Well, he and Wong were guiding our pack. I needed to know as much as possible about them.” He liked to do his homework, know the lay of the land, understand the strengths and weaknesses of every situation.

Tony settled on the ratty looking rug in front of the fireplace. “Our pack?”

“If you ever want to know about what Beloved means, talk to someone who is a Beloved.”

“You did?”

Steve shook his head. “Not really. It’s fantastically hard to find someone to talk to and most soul packs are isolated so you can’t get access them. I did read a lot about it. One of the things that struck me though was the whole Beloved thing.”

“Yeah?” Tony was quiet, even the single word was whispered.

“Beloved is just between you and me. The rest of the pack respects your place. They circle around us. The two of us.” Steve kept his voice low, almost reverent. “Beloved not only means the connotations that you keep going back to, Tony. It’s the culmination of all of the other possible labels from Family to Confidant to Companion.”

“I’ve been trying to learn more about it. Not just about the hot sex and stuff we’re missing out on. But what it means overall. I do my homework,” Tony said as the firelight flickered over him.

“Beloved and Leader are equals. Many think that packs that do have the Beloved position are the true soul packs, complete packs.” Steve concentrated on the fire, not looking at Tony as he talked. “Heart and soul of the pack. Each person in the pack offers a distinct role. Beloved centers the entire pack. Supports the entire pack. Becomes the soul center.”
“How about lover?” Tony said. He must have detected the trepidation in Steve’s heart. “See you think it’s gross.”

“No,” Steve said and knew the words flowing out of him were true. “I don’t think of it that way. It’s not something I considered before because it was not an option when I was younger.”

“Oh, so you think gay people just arrived on the scene? Because I can tell you-."

Steve put his hand up as he turned his gaze to Tony. “No, that’s not what I mean. It wasn’t an option. No one talked about it. No one discussed it. It wasn’t just a ‘dirty little secret’ of some people. You just didn’t talk about it or consider it.”

Steve felt as the words weighed down on Tony. “So do you consider it now?”

Steve lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. “I’m not sure. I don’t know. I’m still trying to find myself in this world and in this pack. I don’t want to say for sure that I would never consider it, because that’s not telling the truth.” He had to say it, though he didn’t like the thought of putting it out into the world like that, but the solemn truth was that he had been dreaming about Tony for months, if not years now. Every encounter was more real, more moving than the next. He might not know all the details of Tony’s life, but he knew, in intimate detail, his soul.

“So-.” Tony stopped and tilted his head as he studied Steve. The firelight flashed over his face, glowing gold. “So you would consider it?”

“I could.” Admitting that felt like he’d lifted a boulder up a mountain. “I can’t say that it would be easy for me. But I would. You have to give me room to figure it out and to stop with the teasing.”

Steve fixed his eyes on the fire. He didn’t want to show his shame at the pain he felt when Tony used that sharp wit.

“It’s not teasing. It’s more like taunting. But I get your point. I understand. I’ll try. I’m not saying it will be easy or anything. Sometimes I just run off at the mouth,” Tony said. “A lot like now, I can’t figure out when to stop. Do they have any coffee around here?”

Steve smiled. “Like now?”

“Like yes, I want coffee,” Tony said. His dismissal of the fact that he bubbled over with nervous energy in front of him put a little quirk in Steve’s grin. It was almost like Tony might actually like Steve.

Tony left the warmth of the fire and went to what amounted to the kitchen area of the cabin. It had a place to prepare food, a cupboard, and a basket with a cover. Tony rummaged around and, when he opened up the cupboard, said, “Ah! I knew it!”

“What’s that?” Steve said and stood up.

Tony pushed aside the jarred foods and pointed to what looked like an electrical outlet. “I knew this place couldn’t be that Medieval.”

“It is if there’s nothing to actually plug into the socket,” Steve said.

“Naysayer,” Tony said and then spent the next fifteen minutes searching the place for anything to plug into the outlet. When he stopped, empty handed, he glowered at Steve. “Don’t you say it.”

“I was only going to say I found some ground coffee beans in the cupboard. I can use some snow to melt for water. I can try and brew some up over the fire. It might not be the quality-.”
“God, please do. I slept like crap last night,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Steve said as he went to the door to scoop up some snow with the kettle. “Me too. Been having very vivid dreams.” He hadn’t meant to admit that part, but it felt good to finally say it out loud to Tony. He opened the cabin door and peered around, trying to get his bearings, but the forest speckled with snow and ice isolated them from everything and everyone else. He used the kettle to shove the snow directly into it. He shut the door with Tony hovering close behind him.

“You dream a lot?” Tony asked and it seemed like an odd question.

“No more than anyone else, I would assume,” Steve said. The idea of dreaming never truly terrified him until the ice, of course. The shadows of that time haunted him. He’d spent many hours with Bruce, discussing the dark shades that followed him out of the frozen wasteland to his dreams. His dreams now were nothing like that, they were both erotic and intimate. He swallowed as he inwardly confessed he looked forward to dreaming now.

“But they’re vivid?” Tony said as Steve worked on the coffee. It had been decades since he sat at a campfire and made coffee from ground beans.

Steve only shrugged at Tony’s question. He wasn’t about to reveal that he’d spent the last few years having distressingly realistic dreams about Tony, and that they were not of a Puritan variety.

“You know how it is. They call it PTSD now?” Steve used that a lot in the beginning with Bruce, before he finally opened up about the darkness of the ice. “Plus the whole ice thing compounded it.”

Tony deflated a degree and nodded. “Well, the coffee smells good.”

“Wait until you see if I burn it,” Steve said. “Can you check and see if there are any cups or mugs somewhere?”

Tony went through the cupboard again. “I think I saw something. Ah, here they are.” He pulled out two dented tin cups from the shelf behind the table. “I guess these will do.” He brought them over to the fire.

Steve poured each cup as Tony held them. “Sorry we don’t have any sugar or milk.”

“This is a dream,” Tony said with a grin. “At least we won’t die.”

“People don’t die from not having coffee, Tony,” Steve said. Still, when he watched Tony settle down on the overturned bucket again to bask in the glow of the fire and the taste of the coffee, Steve couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

The spell broke as Tony said, “So how long do you think Strange expects us to stay here?”

“No idea,” Steve said as he glanced around the cabin. “Do you think he has some way to monitor the situation?”

Tony shook his head. “Didn’t see any type of monitoring devices when I searched the cabin.” He frowned in thought. “But then again, I don’t know how magic monitors things.”

“He obviously doesn’t expect us to be here long. There’s no way out of the cabin without help and there’s no food except for the coffee and a bag of rice I found that might have worms in it.” Steve indicated the stash below the table. “Wong told me that when Strange was learning the arts of magic, the Ancient One, his teacher, stranded him on a mountain top in winter until he figured it out. He would have frozen to death if he didn’t. So maybe we’re supposed to figure it out?”
“But like you said, no way through the wilderness out there not with how we’re equipped at least, and no way to stay.”

“So it must have something to do with the soul pack,” Steve said. “It must be his first lesson.”

“Way to go with the lesson, dickhead!” Tony raised his tin mug and yelled into the rest of the shadowed cabin. Steve snickered in response. “Oh, the old man has a sense of humor.”

Without offense, Steve replied, “You’d be surprised.”

“Maybe,” Tony said and then after a pause added, “You know this soul pack thing isn’t going to go anywhere if we don’t figure it out. Strange is right about that.”

“The few other soul packs in the world work,” Steve said. “But they haven’t had the rough start we’ve had.” He stared at his own wrist, a menagerie of markings ran over his arm now. “I’m sorry about what happened to your parents. I know you blame Bucky-.”

“I don’t, not really,” Tony said. He gazed into the fire as if finding some comfort there. “He’s the ultimate Manchurian candidate. I get that, but wrapping it into my head and looking at his face, I’ll always remember what he did to my mom.”

“I know,” Steve said. “The soul pack can help you through it, you know. Being connected to Bucky-.” He glimpsed Tony’s cringe so he rushed on with his thoughts. “It might help to feel it from his point of view. It won’t be easy, but it could be cathartic.”

“It could be,” Tony said. “Do you? Can you talk to them?”

“What? You mean through the soul bond?” Steve asked and joined Tony on the floor. He pushed the stool away so he wouldn’t sit right on top of Tony, but the closeness as the wind howled outside brought him comfort he wouldn’t vocally admit to at all. He tasted the coffee. It wasn’t bad – it wasn’t good – but it was drinkable. “Kind of. Like I can tell when Natasha is being quiet, keeping anything I told her in confidence. I can feel when Bruce is having a rough day and send him the Mantra to calm down. Clint is new so I’m not sure, but there’s something he’s hiding from us. I don’t know what it is. Natasha knows though, I can tell. And Sam – well Sam brings me a sense of peace and understanding. That’s not to say Sam doesn’t have his rough days. He does. All of us have our guilt and burdens to bear.”

“So it’s just feelings?” The intensity of Tony’s gaze nearly took Steve’s breath away.

“No, no.” Steve dropped his gaze and shook his head. “It’s more than that. Like if I’m working with them, training, I can tell where they are. What they’re doing, what they’re facing. Natasha and I used it a lot when we worked together at SHIELD. In fact, it came into play when we faced the Winter Soldier, Bucky, in DC. He was after her, had shot her in the shoulder – I knew exactly where he was because of her and the bond.”

When Steve looked up, Tony’s mouth was agape in astonishment. “You mean to tell me it was like an internal radar?”

“Yes, something like that. Plus I could tell how she was wounded and how much danger she felt she was in. It was all communicated through the bond. Not words but feelings and glimpses of life. On top of that I was able to call Sam to the scene to help.” Steve placed the coffee mug on the floor. “It worked like a charm and Sam hadn’t even been bonded for twenty-four hours.”

Tony narrowed his eyes as he studied Steve. “You’re serious. This link works that well?”
“Serious, yes. It does.” Steve considered the possibilities, the potential of the link. “It could do us a lot of good.”

Tony smirked. “Could you imagine if we were con artists, what we could get away with? Ocean’s 11 move aside.”

“I might not exactly understand that reference, but I understand that reference,” Steve said and chuckled as Tony screwed up at his face.

“Now you’re just playing with me,” Tony replied. He’d finished his coffee and sidled closer to the fire. “He can’t leave us here for that long.”

“No, but I suppose we’re not anywhere else in the universe. Like we haven’t suddenly been transported to another planet,” Steve said as he stood up and looked out at the raging storm. “So maybe the test is to use the link to help the rest of the team find us.”

Tony had gotten to his feet and stood beside Steve. He gazed out of the window. “How do we do that?”

Steve shook his head. “Not sure. It was kind of automatic before. Like I just reached out and suddenly knew where Natasha was or called mentally to Sam and he came.”

“Or when the train was attacked and you called out,” Tony said and nodded. He pointed to Steve. “I get it. But you instigated all of that. Does that mean only you can do it?”

“I don’t think so?” Steve said. He twisted his mouth as he contemplated, and then said, “How about we try this? You could try and send a signal to me.” Steve went to the fire again and sat down on the rug. He must look ridiculous, big and clumsy as he tried to exude calm.

“What? You mean through telepathy?” Tony crossed his arms over his chest as if to protect himself. “You said it didn’t work that way.”

While the world designated Steve as a master tactician, communication eluded him sometimes. “Well, just kind of think about how you need me.”

“Are you proposing to me, Captain?” Tony snickered and quirked his brows. He joined Steve on the floor again, near the fire.

“Be serious,” Steve said. “If we ever want Strange to get us out of here, we have to show we’re trying. Like we said he must be monitoring us somehow.”

Tony rolled his eyes and sighed. “We could make this fun. Like use the bed, be like teenagers. Sweat it out a little.” When Steve only glared at him, Tony sighed again. “Fine, have it your way.” He closed his eyes. After a minute he muttered, “I feel silly.”

“Just try.”


“I understood that reference,” Steve said. “And it might help if you stopped talking to me.”

As the fire crackled in the background, the light flickering across the small cabin, Steve went through the Mantra in his head to open up his thoughts to Tony. The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul. He repeated the phrase in his head several times as he purposefully breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth in slow, easy breaths. He’d come to love the Mantra because it
not only worked to ease the tension of so many minds and feelings barraging him daily, but it calmed 
the hell of being so displaced, so isolated from home.

A gasp and Steve snapped his eyes open. Tony opened his mouth in a round o shape and stared wide 

“You’re not isolated. You have a home. You do know that, right?” Tony said and his hand reached 
out, touched Steve’s which laid on his crossed legs. It stayed there – laying on his, skin warmed by 
the fire.

“You got that?” Steve asked and his mouth felt dry. He licked his lips. His natural reaction to pull 
away rose but Steve fought it off. “You heard all of that?”

“Felt it, heard it. Yeah, something like that. It wasn’t a direct thought, but the feeling was clear. And 
shit, Steve, no, you are not alone,” Tony said and squeezed his hand.

The intimacy of a touch to his hand surprised Steve. He focused on Tony’s hand, laid gently over 
his, but slightly tightened at the same time. As he relaxed, Steve welcomed warmth of it, flesh to 
flesh. No part of him felt repulsed or wrong. He wondered, and then turned his hand over to grasp 
Tony’s hand. He pushed gratitude out through the bond, not sure if he was over thinking it, over 
working it. Would it not work at all or would it be like a tidal wave of feelings.

A slow smile curved over Tony’s mouth. “Okay, I get it. Don’t have to overdo it.”

“Didn’t know if it would work,” Steve said. He focused on their hands together. This was okay. This 
was how it should be. “The bonds, you know, don’t bleed out. I mean, if I reach out to only you I’m 
pretty sure it’s not like a party line and everyone gets the signal. Just you get the signal, if I’m 
focused.”

Tony couldn’t stop a little laugh. “You are an old man. Yeah, this is a private line.” He nodded and 
he didn’t pull his hand away from Steve. “So can we do this private line stuff with everyone?”

Steve shrugged but didn’t take his hand away. After so long with little contact with anyone else that 
wasn’t in a battle, he basked and enjoyed it. “I think. I do it with Bruce, Nat, and Sam a bit. Not 
much. I don’t want to burden them.”

“Ohkay,” Tony said and lowered his gaze to their linked hands. Part of Steve recognized a wisp of 
sadness as if Tony hoped this was special.

“I think being Beloved makes our connection different though. I think it’s deeper, possibly even able 
to transfer more direct thoughts.” Steve couldn’t fathom why he was trying to make it better for 
Tony.

“It’s okay,” Tony said as if he read a little too much through their bond. “You don’t have to try-..” He 
attempted to pull his hand away.

Steve clamped his other hand over Tony’s to keep it still, to trap it next to his and then he looked up 
and their faces were only inches apart. Tony’s breath spilled over him, smelling of coffee. Their 
weight together, the soul bond a pulse in the background easing them to the center point. It would 
take only a slight movement to touch Tony’s lips with his own. Yet to touch, to kiss, meant for Steve 
that he would not move over a distance of an inch, but miles and miles over a chasm filled with a 
churning beliefs of wrongness. He closed his eyes, and backed away. The shame heated his face. 
And he found that he wasn’t ashamed at the idea of it, but that he couldn’t go through with it, that his 
inaction hurt Tony.
Tony cleared his throat and Steve opened his eyes – almost too frightened to look. Tony shook his head. “I can’t expect the world from you, can I?”


Tony inhaled, held it, and then released it, cooling off the moment. “Listen, we don’t even know one another. Not all that well. Right now, the universe might tell us one thing-.”

“Exactly,” Steve agreed. “But we don’t know what it means for us.”

Tony nodded but the melancholy wouldn’t fade from his eyes. “So we define it our way. Just don’t – I can’t handle it if you decide I’m disgusting because I want to be with another guy. I can’t handle prejudice against my sexuality.”

The idea of Tony being with someone else, another guy, struck Steve and he hated it. A sense of possession, of belonging to someone and that someone belonging to him, swam over him. “I don’t think you’re disgusting,” Steve said and knew the truth of it. It wasn’t about Tony – it was about himself.

“That’s not right; you’re not gross,” Tony said.

“Stop reading my thoughts,” Steve said.

“Stop projecting them,” Tony teased and they lapsed into silence – still holding hands and staring into the fire. They sat together, quiet and abiding for a long time, but it felt like only seconds to Steve before Strange appeared.

Maybe, just maybe when Strange told them to follow him through the golden portal again, a tiny wisp of regret hit Steve. While Strange spoke of their progress and the rest of the day included multiple trials and lessons with the rest of the pack, Steve longed for the cabin again. A do over – they called it these days. He missed his chance. He’d given Tony the wrong impression. For once in his life, the door to romance and something more opened, and Steve closed it.

Steve went to bed that night, achingly empty, wishing for something insubstantial, wishing for Tony to be with him. The next morning as he woke from a dead and dreamless sleep his phone chirped with a message at the same time he realized the pain in his heart echoed through the lines of the bonds – through the soul pack. Something was missing. Someone was missing. Someone was gone.

Someone was dead.

He grabbed the phone.

The message read: She’s gone in her sleep.

The world came crashing down.

Chapter End Notes

Real deal this time. I have been trying to keep ahead of the revisions so that I didn't have to break at all. Unfortunately RL just bit me this week as I have been trying to get ready for my surgery. So I will not post the next chapter until May 6th. I am sorry about that, but I figure with my surgery on Monday I will not be able to get to revising chapter 10
until later in the week and I cannot impose that much on thegraytigress. Plus with all the excitement for IW growing, well, I figure I don't want to post that weekend anyway. This will hopefully give me time to revise chapters 10 and 11. And to add the two extra chapters I decided to write. So thank you so much for sticking with this and all the good thoughts for my surgery and recovery, I really appreciate it! :) <3<3<3
CHAPTER 10

After their time in the cabin, a place that Strange spoke of as the Learning Hut, Tony separated himself from the rest of the soul pack. He went through his Mantra, adding in that he wanted privacy and peace. It always worked and helped him maintain a sense of self. He needed time to process what had happened. When he finally got out of the conference room and escaped to his penthouse apartment, Tony sequestered himself in the small room off to the side of the main lounge. He thought of it as his study but hated to call it that because his father had a study off of the main living room of their house on 5th Avenue.

It also wasn’t the usual study – he didn’t have shelves and shelves of books, but what lined the walls – and there were no windows since this was an inner room in the Tower behind his fireplace in the lounge – included embedded holographic interfaces and computer connections with consoles. It was partially his lab and partially his hideaway. He couldn’t physically work on his armor or other upgrades to the team’s needs in the room, but what he could do was lose himself in thought.

He went to the middle of the room where pillows and cushions lined a sloping cradle. Pepper had always called it his crib, but he could lie in it for hours and stare up at the projections around him, surrounding him and lose himself in thought. When he settled on the cushions he asked, “JARVIS, project the latest data on the networking of soul packs.”

Instantly, the few different packs in the world that had been studied appeared, but it wasn’t the players or individuals. Instead what blinked and materialized in tantalizing blues, reds, and yellows included what could only be described as neural networks. As soon as he glimpsed them he recognized it. He might not be a biomedical scientist or engineer, but the similarities couldn’t be denied. Each member offered a piece of the puzzle, yet the individuals were not isolated but merged through the neural networks in a pattern that reminded Tony of his work with artificial intelligence. The idea that he was a part of it excited him, but when he thought of those moments in the cabin, his heart dropped.

What he read through the link he shared with Steve had startled him. The loneliness might have been expected from Steve, but the pure isolation, the alienation from the world around him, stunned Tony. Reaching out to Steve had been instinctual and he had assumed that Steve would pull away. Yet he...
hadn’t, not physically. He allowed Tony to touch him, to hold his hand as they sat by the fire. The communion of their bond tightened then, Tony felt it. He hadn’t known if Steve experienced it, but as when Steve closed the space between them it because crystalline clear that their bond was meant to be something more. Beloved had a special connotation. Not just a Companion or a Lover, but a soul mate, a heart mate.

It saddened him that Steve hadn’t gone through with it, that something stopped him from kissing Tony, and the sorrow scarred the moment. Again, though, Steve hadn’t pulled completely away. He held onto Tony. They stayed touching until Strange showed up. The vibrations of the synchronized bond must have leaked through to the others in the pack and alerted Strange to release them from the cabin. It had worked. The cabin taught them something, and when they stood in the conference room and Steve glanced at Tony with a tender look, Tony couldn’t deny the hope that blossomed in his chest. All through the rest of the day, Tony felt like a teenager when he met Steve’s glance or happened to interact with him during the training exercises. He chastised himself, but his damned brain wouldn’t leave it alone, like a loose thread on a jacket. He teased it and tugged it. He left as quickly as the session was over, saying *we’re all done here, right* and dismissed himself.

He shouldn’t care. Any time in the past when he cared he always ended up burned – either by himself or someone he thought he loved He didn’t even really know Steve as well as he knew someone like Pepper. He’d been in a relationship on and off with Pepper for years, and yet maybe he never really knew her. They weren’t cut from the same cloth. Pepper liked organized and safe activities. She hated Iron Man, not Tony, but she hated the idea of it. It scared her. Steve – well, Steve had to be the ultimate reckless hero. He consented to an unproven treatment to change him into a super soldier. He rushed in when others raced to safety. In some ways, Steve and Tony were cut from the same cloth. Growing up in the shadow of Captain America memories influenced Tony. He couldn’t deny it. At first, he’d loved Cap and tried to emulate him, but then he resented Cap and lashed out at everything and everyone who symbolized Captain America. Yet, now he found himself in a different place. A different thought process when he thought of Captain America. Maybe because he’d met Steve, started to know Steve and the persona of Captain America faded away. He began to see who Steve was and how they slotted together. Steve and Tony approached the fighting the good fight in different ways: justice, responsibility, accountability, and freedom all wrapped up into sides of the same coin. And now they were bonded together and they were part of a pack that hopefully would protect and save the world. For once, Tony wasn’t alone in his fight and then he realized it with a gasp.

Tony’s thoughts of needing to do it alone reflected Steve’s own loneliness. They mirrored one another. He stared at the neural networks buzzing overhead and understood a little more of his attraction and his bond with Steve.

Later when he crawled into bed, Tony didn’t pitch his soul outward to touch Steve. He left him alone for now. Tony needed to find his way and to recognize what he wanted from Steve before he bothered him again. His strategy would have worked, if he hadn’t woken up only hours later with a gut-wrenching agony of loss in his belly and the pain eating away his own grip on the world and sanity. He sat straight up in bed, wide awake. With his hand on his chest, he asked, “JARVIS, what’s going on?”

“Sir?”

“The pain,” Tony said and reached out, nearly blind with the anguish, to steady himself on the side table as he stood up. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure to what you refer, sir.”
That was when he stumbled to the doorway to the ensuite bathroom and clutched the frame with his hand. He closed his eyes and felt the throbbing ache. “Steve?” He felt it then, the openness, the raw wound. The soul pack was bleeding and their leader rudderless. “Where’s Steve? Right now, where’s Steve?”

“Captain Rogers is in his apartment.”

“Check on him, now,” Tony ordered and went to the bathroom. He finished up and then washed his hands and threw water on his face as JARVIS reported back.

“Captain Rogers is on the phone. He seems in some distress. I cannot read much more from the limited sensors I have in the private quarters.”

Tony knew he would come to hate the idea of privacy in the different apartments, but at the same time he hated being the weird overlord peeping into people’s lives. “Okay. I’m going there now.”

He ran barefooted to the elevator and JARVIS took him down to Steve’s assigned level. When the doors of the elevator opened after asking for entrance, Tony found Steve on his couch head in his hands and phone on the cushion next to him.

Through the waves of the bond, Tony felt the ache. It had been there before as he woke up, Tony realized that some key part of the bond was missing, gone. Standing in front of Steve, the rebound of the ache increased to be acute and potent. He reached out, nearly afraid to do so because of the pain, and touched Steve’s shoulder.

“Steve?” Tony said in a low voice, unwilling to upset him any further.

“She’s gone, Tony, gone,” Steve said and, as he looked up to meet Tony’s gaze, that same feeling of alienation and isolation pulsed through the bond. The anguish grew and Tony dropped to sit next to Steve, not sure he could remain standing.

“I know,” Tony said because he did know. He understood that Peggy was gone, that one of the last links to his time, his home, had died leaving Steve behind, and as he thought it – the idea of Steve being left behind leaked through the bond. Steve shuddered next to him and covered his face as if he experienced shame in his weakness.

Part of Steve, a very large part, wanted nothing more than to be alone, to deal with his grief and to hide it, wrap it up with all of the rest of his heartache of loss and sorrow and suppress it. Tony read all of it through the bond, so raw and exposed. Tony slid his arm around Steve’s shoulders and wanted to say he didn’t have to be alone. The words stuck in his throat, because he knew what Steve was going through in some small way. Tony had a tendency to take on the burdens of the world and not look for outside help. Hell, he operated as Iron Man like that for years.

“Come here,” Tony said and gathered Steve close to him. At first, Steve stayed frozen, not moving, not accepting Tony’s sympathy. Tony relaxed and relented, opened his soul and allowed the bond to brighten and shine. He had no words to speak but with the bond, through his soul, he communicated so much. Steve wrapped his arms around Tony and buried his face in Tony’s shoulder just as the doors to the elevator opened again and Natasha along with Bruce appeared.

“She’s gone,” Steve managed to say again. He spoke in quiet words with a wrecked voice.

“I know,” Tony said and then added, “We all know.”

Steve pulled away and wiped at his eyes. “Sam went to find out about the arrangements.”

“Okay,” Natasha said. “What do you need for us to do?”
Steve closed down and that’s when Tony placed his hand over Steve’s and said, “Contact Sam. Find out what he knows. We’ll travel to DC or wherever the funeral takes place.” London. He thought Steve had said something about Peggy being moved to London by her children. “All of us together. Bruce, could you work with JARVIS and get the jet ready to go?”

“Sure, no problem,” Bruce said, though he stayed a good few meters away as if he feared too intimate a touch might set off the other guy.

Natasha waited as Bruce exited to confer with JARVIS. She touched Steve’s shoulder and said, “Steve, you’re not alone.”

Steve gave a small smile and said, “She said that to me, you know. She said it to me. And now she’s gone. She’s the last, except for-.” He stopped and closed his eyes. “She was my Guide. I loved her. As long as she was still with me, still with us, there was a link to-.” He couldn’t voice the rest, but then again, he didn’t need to. Tony looked at Natasha hoping that she might have some magic words to make this right again.

“Steve,” Natasha said and then she knelt in front of him, her hand on his knee. “She’s always part of us. Her link may be gone but you can feel her presence still. She helped you accept this world. Don’t make light of that. It was important.”

Tony felt it; the doors closing, the windows shuttering within Steve. “No, you don’t do that. Peggy said you weren’t alone and you’re not. You stay with us, you understand? We can’t lose you, too.” Tony realized as he spoke his own tears broke free. He glanced at Natasha and tears also stained her face. “She was strong for us. You have to stay with us. Steve, please.”

Tony wasn’t sure they succeeded, because Steve stood up and moved away from their touches, their embrace of him. His soul was shut and distant. He walked to the window and stared out. “Okay.” It sounded cold, bereft of feeling.

“You don’t get to do that,” Tony said again as he got to his feet as well. Natasha followed him. “You stay with us. We’re your family now. We’re your pack.”

Natasha echoed his words, “Steve, listen to him.”

“He didn’t even want to be part of the pack.” Steve’s words were muttered but then he turned and focused on them. His face was in shadow. “She was all I had from my life.”

“That’s not true,” Tony said. “You have Bucky.” It hurt; it hurt like hell to say it. But it was the truth and Natasha gave him a small nod to acknowledge his sacrifice.

“I can’t do that to you. It’s too hard.”

“Well, we’ll figure it out when the time comes. Right?” Tony looked to Natasha for some support. She agreed.

“Sooner or later we will deal with it. We’re a pack. He’s part of it. We’ll figure it out,” Natasha said. The bond shook, tremulous and bright, but it remained.

Over the course of the morning, Tony and Natasha got Steve to dress and to eat – though only an egg and toast seemed a little too small for a super soldier’s metabolism. Later, Sam reported that Peggy would be interned in England and her funeral would be held in two days’ time. Bruce worked with JARVIS to schedule the private jet and Tony arranged the hotel reservations. Steve went through his daily routine, punching bags, running Central Park, and answering lingering questions about SHIELD’s collapse. On the surface, Steve remained cool and calm, but the storm boiled
underneath the surface. He held it back but even when he clearly tried to cut the rest of the pack off with chanting the Mantra, his pain and denial seeped through the links. More often than not, Tony sought him out to try and alleviate it, though he had no idea what to do. Not even his usual resources like Pepper and Rhodey gave him strong direction about what to do and how to handle Steve. Neither of them was part of the pack and didn’t have much understanding on how something like a soul bond worked. In the end he succumbed to asking Strange for help.

Only a few hours before he needed to board the flight, he found himself at Strange’s conclave. He sat in Strange’s office as the sorcerer eyed him with what amounted to either disgust or challenge in his expression.

“Are you going to help me out or what?” The high-backed chair gave Tony the chills since he couldn’t see what might be behind him.

“I’m still not sure what you expect of me. You don’t want another lesson right now. So I am at a loss as to what I can do for you.” Strange steepled his fingers just like a classic clichéd villain. Maybe he was the villain of the story.

“Like I said, the loss of Peggy is more than the loss of our Guide. She was Steve’s last connection to the other life he had – if you don’t count Barnes.”

“But he has Barnes, correct?”


Tony ground his teeth before he said, “Don’t you think that Steve should move on? That he should come to accept that he’s never going back, that the life he lived before is over?”

Strange tilted his head. “Maybe you are more alike than not.” He stood up and held his hands behind his back as he assessed Tony. “Are you the one to talk? You are mired in the past. Your father’s love and betrayal is a constant nagging pain for you-.”

“How did you-.” Tony started.

“Please, everyone heard about your display. How you went to your alma mater and used that BARF technology to show off your own inner pain.” Tony clamped his mouth shut as the sorcerer studied him. “You both have that in common, I think. The past haunts you.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Tony retorted but didn’t look the sorcerer in the eyes.

“And still you came to me.”

Tony snapped his attention to Strange. “I came to you because you were supposed to be the expert here. You were supposed to help us figure this shit out.”

“Lessons have been offered. Wong has done his best to teach the pack but the whole lot of you tend to be loose cannons. What other pack would be so dispersed for so long!” Strange’s cloak bristled at his words.

“Well, we’re not your average soul pack,” Tony said. That had to be his lamest comeback ever. “Listen, I need help to work this out. I came here to get some words to help Steve. He’s shut down and feeling more and more alienated every day.”
Strange settled again in the chair opposite Tony. “Your captain is only isolated because he is doing it to himself. Think of the time he came from – it was a time when men were stoic and didn’t deal with their feelings. As his Beloved, you need to bring him to the point where he will deal with it, where he recognizes his feelings, knows what they are, and accepts them.”

“I’m not the best candidate for this,” Tony said. “I seriously don’t deal with feelings, emotions well myself.”

“Well, then think of it as a teaching point for both of you,” Strange replied.

The meeting ended with Strange offering Tony more books on the subject of Beloved. He left the sorcerer informed but still confused on how to handle emotions. It occurred to him that the team had barely spent time together and that Strange was right on that account. How could they form the correct connections if they were constantly avoiding the pack itself? The fact of the matter was, this funeral would really be the first time, outside of the session with Wong, that they actually spent time together – supporting one another- as a pack. He headed to the airport, books in hand and a lot to weigh on his mind.

Buckling in on the jet, Tony watched the other members of the team. Natasha and Bruce sat next to one another – she most obviously was in charge of keeping him calm. Clint and Sam played a game of chess as Steve sat to the back of the jet and by himself. Tony frowned as he looked down at the seatbelt. He stopped and unclipped it, then he got up and went to join Steve. Steve only gave him a cursory glance and then turned back to his book. It was one of the ones Tony brought back from Strange.

“Hey, where’d you get that?” Tony said as he peered at the title.

“You brought it on board. I thought we could all read them.” Steve went to close the book.

Tony stopped him with a hand on the book. “No, you can read it if you want. I just didn’t realize anyone was going to start studying right away.”

Steve pushed back into the cushion of the seat. “I don’t know, I think we’re not utilizing the pack the way we should. We’re the Avengers and we’re not even a real team. Haven’t been since the Chitauri invaded.”

“You can say that again,” Tony said but then held up his hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m not saying I’m not part of the problem.”

Steve closed the book and put it on the table between them. “We’re all a little part of the problem. We’re so used to doing things, getting the job done, on our own, doing it our own way, I don’t think we know how to function as a group.”

“Well, maybe it’s time you and I figure that out?” Tony said and he felt the ground beneath him tremble. It wasn’t just the jet racing down the runway. He wondered if he’d crossed a line, but then Steve smiled and it easing the quaking through the bond.

“That would be good. Actually great,” Steve said. He glanced at the team. “Natasha learned how to partner with Clint. He brought her into SHIELD. Clint might be a good resource to figure out how to bring the team together.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow. He hadn’t considered those facts, but the truth was Steve was rumored to be an excellent tactician and a strategist. Examining their resources and projecting how to utilize them would help the pack. He studied Steve and then said, “We’re a team but more than that we are
“In name,” Steve agreed. “Maybe someday we’ll be more.” He wasn’t meeting Tony’s gaze. Instead he stared past Tony to the window as the plane lifted into the air. Through the bond, he felt Steve’s distance and pain, again. Even trying to keep busy failed him. The pain seeped through and became his misery.

Tony had memories of Peggy Carter, dim and distant as they were. He also recalled the stories of Captain Rogers and his love or in later years of Peggy Carter and her loss. The idea of their story ached through him and he wondered if it was an echo through the bond. “I’m sorry,” Tony said as they achieved cruising altitude. “It must be doubly hard now to say goodbye. First you lost her your chance with her, got her back as your Guide. Kind of like a consolation prize. Plus, you got stuck with me as your Beloved.”

Steve made a little gurgle of a sound as if the laughter drown in his sorrow. He shook his head and glanced over at Tony. “I guess it all worked out, right? I wouldn’t want Peggy to be lost without me. She went on and lived her life. That’s a good thing.” He stared straight ahead as if he was watching her life as it played out in front of him. A small furrow appeared between his brows. The pain of a life that slipped through his fingers.

Tony chanced to reach over and put his hand on Steve’s that was sitting between them on top of the book. “Are you going to live your life now?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Steve whispered and it was painfully clear the way he dropped his eyes and then closed them that he did.

“You do,” Tony said. He could have thrown a flippant remark but he didn’t. He kept his hand touching Steve, and then leaned down to meet his gaze as he opened his eyes. “You’re not alone.”

Steve frowned. “People keep saying that to me.”

“Maybe you should start believing them,” Tony returned. The corner of Steve’s mouth upturned and Tony felt something hard and harsh ease through the bond. “You really are tense.”

Steve sighed. “It’s been -.” He stopped and then slowly pulled his hand away to fold them together. “It’s been difficult for a while.”

“Because of me,” Tony said and he swallowed down the nausea. He never could handle people who were outright homophobic.

Steve scratched at that light furrow he often got during times of stress. “Not because of you. Because of me. Because.” He dropped his hand and looked up at the ceiling of the fuselage. “Because I lied to myself for so long and now, now it’s over. Everything is over, and I can’t lie anymore. I have to face the truth of it. The universe has. I just haven’t.”

The potency of the moment struck Tony, reminding him of hitting Mach 1 in the armor. He held tight and didn’t move for fear that he might startle or terrify Steve. “Lie to yourself?”

Steve swung around and faced Tony, his hands in a tight ball in his lap. “I grew up differently. Sometimes it feels like I’m actually on a different planet or something. Nothing makes sense and at the same time everything makes sense. Peggy used to say I was too dramatic. Maybe I am. But maybe, just maybe, the world leaped forward and I can’t catch up.”

“You seem to be doing pretty good most of the time,” Tony commented yet his throat tightened.
“Outward appearances were paramount in my day. Men didn’t show emotion. It’s not something we did. Not something I know how to do,” Steve said. He sat back, fighting to relax. His eyes closed. “I have to carry Peggy’s casket. And for the first time in my life, I don’t think I’ll be able to keep my outward appearance. For the first time, I might-.” He breathed, loud and shaking.

“We’re all here for you, Steve,” Tony said. He touched Steve’s arm and then slowly got him to release. Tony grasped Steve’s hand. “You are not alone. Remember that.”

Steve stayed quiet during most of the rest of the flight. While they didn’t hold hands the entire way, Steve seemed to take comfort in Tony remaining close to him. The bond spoke to Tony in ways it never had in his experience. Between them the link grew and warmed – Tony found that he liked it, and even more so he discovered his soul craved the contact, both physical and metaphysical. He watched Steve for any sign that he might be experiencing the same thing.

Steve was stoic. Steve had confessed that he wrapped all of his emotions deep inside of him. So, it wasn’t a surprise that even digging a little along the link brought up nothing. Yet the link wove and thickened. It felt stronger, brighter, more powerful if that was even the correct term.

When they disembarked, Steve gravitated to Tony’s side and they ended up sharing a car together to get to the hotel that JARVIS had booked. Steve only mumbled a few words now and again, and once they were checked in, he said his goodnights and went to his room without a further word.

Natasha sidled up to Tony as they watched Steve head to the elevators in the posh London hotel. The lobby of the Hyde Park hotel shined with white marble veined with gray. Black pillars atop white bases gave a clean line while staying traditional and inviting. Tony had always liked the hotel when he was in London on business. He was glad that JARVIS managed to pull off getting rooms at the last minute.

While Steve disappeared onto the elevator, Natasha said, “You did good.”

He didn’t look at her. Steve was gone; the elevator had closed but he felt the strings of his soul vibrate with a new yearning.

“It was good, you know, to feel him accepting things,” Natasha said.

That jolted Tony back to the present and out of the weavings of the soul bond. “What?” Tony asked as Clint and Sam along with Bruce headed toward the elevators with their luggage as well.

“I could feel it.” Natasha said with a smile. “I think everyone could.”

“Feel what?”

Natasha knocked him with an elbow, winked, and as she ran to catch the lift with Bruce said, “Steve’s coming around.”

Tony tried not to let that comment infuse a light step to his walk but he failed. He had intended to visit the bar but instead went directly to his room. His nerves tingled and he scanned the expansive suite with its king-sized bed, pale greys, and muted pastel colors. The bed had the finest linens. There was a hint of postmodern age décor with a touch of classical furniture that easily complemented one another. The bathroom reflected the lobby with grey white marble, clean lines, and columns to accent the look. He’d been here a hundred times but seemed to be seeing it for the first time. It overwhelmed him – how gorgeous and how opulent the room was.

And for the first time he realized the feelings, the sense of displacement mixed with marvel, weren’t his own emotions at all. He placed a hand on his chest. “Steve?” Christ, if he was stunned, lost,
when he confronted a simple thing like a luxurious hotel room, the entire world must be hell. Tony crossed the room and went to open the door only to stop when he discovered Steve standing on the other side with his hand raised to knock.

“Steve?”

“You-I,” Steve said, peered over his shoulder as if he expected someone there. “Can I come in? I kind of would like some company.”

“Hmm, yeah sure?” Tony stepped aside.

Steve accepted the invitation and entered the room, his one hand clasping the back of his neck. “Your room is as crazy as mine.”

“Probably a little crazier,” Tony said, because he knew that JARVIS would have secured him a suite with multiple rooms.

Steve walked into the sitting room of the suite and rubbed his hands on his pants before turning to Tony to say, “Thanks for what you did on the plane. That was nice.”

“Do you want to sit down? We can order some burgers.”

“Burgers?” Steve asked and fumbled his way to one of the white couches even though he looked supremely uncomfortable with his straight back and his rigid posture.

“Burgers, fries, shakes,” Tony said. “I know a guy.” He went right to work, that way Steve wouldn’t be able to stop him. He knew the management at the hotel and all he had to do was click his fingers and he plus his guests would get anything they desired and ordered. He listed everything he wanted and asked that all of the order be sent to his room in less than 30 minutes. Once off the phone he turned and smiled to Steve. “See? That’s how it’s done.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Steve said. He wasn’t even relaxing. Still straight backed, still stiff like rigor mortis just set in.

“Yes, I did, and maybe you can sit back, relax a little, and pretend I’m not about to interrogate you,” Tony said. Steve tensed his shoulders, but then flexed his hands as he shifted, attempting and failing to lighten up. Tony twisted his mouth and raised an eyebrow. “This is more than just coming over to say thanks.”

“Yeah, it is,” Steve said. “I’m grateful, Tony. To the whole team, the whole pack for coming with me. I can’t imagine going through Peggy’s funeral with no one, or even just one of you. Everyone here means so much.”

Tony settled on the couch only an arm’s length from Steve. “It’s weird. We might not be a team that’s been so close over the last couple of years, but the truth is we’ve all been circling around you, haven’t we?”

“I’m not certain of that at all,” Steve said. “Strange is right. We need to focus more. We need to be a team even without the whole soul pack.”

“We need to,” Tony agreed. His voice sounded far away. “We don’t know what’s coming. We need to protect the world.” He shivered. Even as Tony sat in the lavish room in the middle of London, the darkness of the void of space shadowed over him. He’d never felt the chill of space when he hovered
with a nuclear bomb on his back, but still, the cold hollowed out his chest, ate away at his bones, permeated into his soul. That place haunted him.

“Tony,” Steve said and it startled him out of his reverie. His hand was hot and curled over Tony’s. “We’re all in this together. You don’t have to go it alone either. Together.”

“Together,” Tony said with a nod.

At that point the knock came for the delivery and they chowed down on it. Steve told stories of his younger days and Tony relished it. It helped in some ways to hear Bucky humanized and not just some instrument of Hydra. The conflict that they were one and the same person plagued Tony, but when he heard of both the bravery and the smart-ass interactions that Steve had with Bucky, Tony’s hatred started to dissolve. He didn’t know if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

“You know,” he said as he picked at the fries. They weren’t quite the same as American fries, especially since the Brits called them chips. “It’s hard to believe he’s the same person. I mean Bucky and the Winter Soldier.”

Steve finished his second burger and then said, “Zola experimented on him, not only in ’43 but after, when government granted Zola to be a working scientist at SHIELD. Of course, he was really just part of the new Hydra growing in SHIELD.” Steve didn’t seem disturbed by the facts he laid out. The strategist and soldier appeared. “It was Zola who did the initial conditioning. I read it in a file that Natasha got from her sources. Hydra inside SHIELD worked right alongside the old Soviet Union.”

“But how could he have possibly been turned to the ‘dark side’?” Tony used air quotes to bracket the last two words.

“Bucky died right before I did. Can you imagine being tortured for how many years before the Winter Soldier appeared on the scene? Natasha said he was a ghost for like fifty years. So that gives them a good dozen or so years to condition and torture him,” Steve said and picked up a basket of the chips. “You have to understand, Tony. I’m not excusing anything that the Winter Soldier did, but I am saying that it wasn’t Bucky. Not the guy I knew.”

“Do you think there’s someone still there? Someone still Bucky to save?” Tony asked.

“There has to be.” Steve munched on the chips. “Otherwise I’d be dead in the Potomac. We’re bonded and I have to believe that means something too.

“He beat the shit out of you and shot you. You still almost died,” Tony said.

With a shrug Steve answered, “From what I understand recovery from that kind of trauma isn’t overnight. So, it will take a while. It’s a process.”

“Well,” Tony said as he dusted off his hands from the meal. “Then we’re going to need help when we finally find him. It’s not like we have the means to wipe away that kind of conditioning.”

Steve stopped eating entirely and put the basket of chips down. “We?”

“Like I said I don’t think I can ever think of him as Brother, but since he’s part of the pack and he’ll start getting more and more of our-.” Tony didn’t know quite how to put it. “Vibes? Yeah, vibes, then I think it would be a good thing to get him and get him well.”

Steve smiled and the genuine appreciation shined through the link. “Thank you, Tony. Thank you very much.” Then the smile dropped and Steve bowed his head, his hands covering his face. It was
the first time Tony witnessed their Captain, their leader, break down.

He shifted and sat right next to Steve, wrapping an arm around those wide shoulders that always served to lift the weight of the world while no one held him. “It’s okay. Hey, I’m here.” Knowing how uncomfortable it might make Steve, Tony changed gears. “We’ll all here for you.”

Steve turned slightly toward Tony, enough that his head rested on Tony’s shoulder. He gave Tony the opportunity to fully embrace Steve. He hesitated only for a moment, but then figured that Steve presented him with the option because he wasn’t opposed to it. Arms around Steve, Tony held him as he mourned the loss of Peggy and more. He spoke quiet words to Steve, telling him the meager stories he had of Peggy Carter, and even the stories he’d read as a child of Captain America, Bucky, and the Howling Commandoes. It was the only resource Tony had other than the scattering of stories his father had offered. Those were less and not as detailed.

Eventually, Steve moved away and the closeness became awkward. He stood up and thanked Tony, excusing himself as he opened and closed his hands as if he wanted to hold onto the moment but at the same time wanted to shove it away. Tony didn’t stand, didn’t get up to move after him. He let Steve go because he had no real words to offer how to make his unease in intimate moments better. Maybe it was because Tony usually laughed off close moments, throwing in a sarcastic remark or quip in order to lighten the mood and cast off the emotional burdens.

Once Steve left, Tony cleared up the mess and headed to the shower. He finished in short order and then crawled into bed, not bothering with his tablet or checking in with the company’s R&D department. Sleep called him and he answered it.

As he opened his eyes he found himself in the small tenement apartment again. For the first time, he felt safe and at home. The place might have been cringe-worthy at one point in time because of all of the old-fashioned furniture, the lack of modern technology, but what he sought was here. Steve.

“You were sleeping. I didn’t want to bother you,” Steve said. He sat across from the bed in a tattered chair with a pad of paper and a lead pencil.

“You’re not sleeping.”

“It’s hard these days.”

“Then come back to bed,” Tony said and shifted. He opened his arms and realized he was nude. There was a fine ache in his ass that he recognized. He smiled. “Come back to bed.”

Unlike reality, Steve responded to the invitation with a smile, placing the pad and pencil on the floor, and then padded over to the bed. He wore only sleeping pants, his chest naked and warm to the touch.

Tony caressed his hands over Steve’s pectoral muscles as the other man settled down on the bed next to him. Steve welcomed the touch and lifted one of Tony’s hands to his lips. “Don’t tell them, okay? If Bucky found out, or Peggy, or any of them – they would hate me.”

“Hate you?” Tony said as he sat up and nuzzled against Steve’s throat, licking and kissing.

“It would break Peggy’s heart,” Steve murmured as he leaned into Tony’s touch.

“Break her heart to know you moved on and fell in love,” Tony whispered as he kissed and enticed.

“I want to, I thought,” Steve started and then blurted it out. “I pretended for so long. Even to myself. I pretended it was because of my size and my illness that I wasn’t attracted. I pretended it was
because of the war. I even pretend now. I lie to myself that I can’t find anyone because of shared life experiences. It’s a nice lie that secures me and I don’t have to face the fact.”

Tony looked at Steve, cradled his jaw in his hand. “What fact?”

Steve never hesitated. He brought Tony to him and kissed him hard and deep. It robbed the air from Tony’s lungs, exploded through his body, and heated his very blood. Tony scraped his fingernails down Steve’s perfect back. When they broke from the kiss, Steve sobbed out, “The fact I want you. I want you now. I want you in me. Please, Tony. Please.”

“You don’t know. You don’t want that,” Tony said. “You’ll wake up tomorrow and hate yourself for it.”

“That I let you – in a dream? I have before. This is a dream, my dream – our dream. What’s so different now?” Steve touched his hand to the small of Tony’s back, drifting lower. “Please.”

He couldn’t say how or why but Tony knew it was more than a dream, more than memories mixed with half wishes. Yet, at the same time, Tony comprehended that if he walked across the room, if he opened one of the closed doors in the tenement apartment bedroom, it would open to nowhere and he would wake up. Everything would dissolve. The dream existed outside of reality, maybe somewhere within weavings of the soul bond. A secured place for them to be together and explore who they were through this soul bond, through the linkage of Beloved.

“Sheer, Tony,” Steve whispered and his hand pushed the blankets away to find Tony’s half hard cock. Steve’s dragged the back of his fingers along the length, the roughness of the knuckles sending spears of pleasure through Tony. “I want you in me. I denied myself. I deny it every day. Please.”

It was only a dream. He told himself these lies. Tony wasn’t breaking any rules. He met Steve’s gaze and it captured him. He could no more rebuff Steve than he could walk away from his identity as Iron Man. Part of him, an empty, vacuous place, filled and he kissed Steve, bringing him down to the bed, laying Steve on top. Steve explored, tentatively and hesitantly as if their time together here in the dream state was their first. Tony knew it wasn’t. So did Steve. But it seemed to Tony that the dream state felt more real, more actual than it had ever felt. Even the fact that they both acknowledged it as a dream state – could it be shared? – was new. The dreamscape became a kind of soul reality to him, and he saw the same reflected back in Steve’s expression, in his desire, and in his yearning for it to be true.

“Tell me. Tell me what to do,” Steve said. “I had these dreams, you know.” He spoke between kisses and licks. He traveled down Tony’s body, worshiping it. He nibbled at nipples and tongued them until Tony hitched his breath and arched with desire. “I had these dreams and we did so much. I want you in me. I denied myself. I deny it every day. Please.”

“In the dream?” Tony said. Half of him asked as a man fully aware that the state he was in was just a fantasy. The other half was a man that wished he could speak so clearly and frankly to Steve.

“In the dream, yes,” Steve said and there was a slight tilt to the tone of his voice, but Tony couldn’t let the moment get lost as he analyzed it.

“I have to prepare you,” Tony said and swallowed down his excitement. The idea of watching Steve, opening Steve up for him sent rivets of excitement through Tony. Gently, Tony angled Steve to get him onto his back. He tugged down Steve’s pants. “You okay?”

Steve rested back on the cushions; his eyes widely dilated, his breathing fast but deep. “Yes, please. I want to see. I want to watch. Everything.”
“Well, first I want you to breathe. Catch your breath,” Tony said and knelt at the edge of the bed. He stroked his hands over Steve’s chest, remembering how he had just tasted Tony’s nipples. Steve was hard, his cock dripping onto his belly as he laid back. “Okay, I’m going to open you up.”

That elicited a small spurt of come and Tony smiled. He reached over to the table, knowing he would find lube there – and knowing that it would be from the modern world, not the world that once was. He popped open the cap and said, “I need you to relax.”

“Want to watch. I want to see,” Steve said and craned his neck as Tony spread the lube on his fingers.

He leaned forward and pushed Steve back. “There will be time for that.” Steve huffed but then Tony touched him, circling his fingers as he did. Tensing, Steve gritted his teeth. “This is supposed to be fun. Not something you can’t stand.”

Steve stared up at the ceiling. “Just a little scared it might hurt.”

“If I do it right, it won’t hurt,” Tony said and then slowly slipped a finger in. Steve shivered and Tony rubbed the inside of his leg. “Relax. Go with the feelings.” Steve followed Tony’s lead, listened to his words, and fell into the feelings. With that the soul bond opened between them and their energies synchronized.

What a wonderful fantasy.

As their energies matched, Steve shuddered and pushed against Tony. For a second Tony thought that Steve might be trying to get away, but he only wanted more. Tony added another finger and shortly a third. Steve pumped against him, his cock thick and heavy against his belly. When he reached for it, Tony grasped his hand and together they stroked him. The rhythm of their hands together echoed the pulsing of their souls. It felt so damned good. Tony had a hard time remembering that this was just a dream, a fantasy, a wish.

Steve mewled and lifted his hips wanting more. He released Steve’s cock. Tony hovered over Steve, fingers still deep inside and slipped a hand under Steve’s neck to lift him to his lips. Tony kissed hungrily, greedily. If this was all he would ever have, then he would take it. His soul yearned for it. His soul bled for it, seeping out its life for this kiss, this touch, this moment in time.

“More, more,” Steve cried out against their kiss.

In seconds, Tony planted himself on top of Steve and removed his fingers. Steve gasped and Tony positioned himself, making sure to add lube before he breached Steve. Under him Steve shuddered and, for a stunning moment, he parted his lips with awe. He splayed his hands out against the bed, gripping the sheets until Tony thought he might rip them. Steve’s cock spilled over his belly yet stayed hard as Tony thrust into him. Moaning, Steve urged Tony to continue. The world around them faded and the tenement apartment no longer existed. Tony wasn’t sure where he was or when he was. All he knew – all he understood – was Steve. Their souls bound and wove together.

The strands of their souls led Tony, and he willingly followed. Steve opened to him, pulled him close and Tony pounded against him, searching, seeking, needing more. He wondered, worried it might be too much for Steve to give. Yet, Steve begged him to take him, cried out in frustration as he worked with Tony, matching his rhythm; he came again and again. That’s when Tony realized it – Steve came but didn’t climax. He hadn’t reached that peak. It seemed incongruent but true. It almost dissolved the moment, but then out of instinct Tony turned to their bond, their interlocked souls. He worked the strands that linked them together, strumming them. They pulsed and sang, vibrating as Tony slammed into Steve’s body. The need, the open, craving ache from Steve, drove Tony
forward, pushed him into a punishing pace even as their souls burst into a bright light all around
them.

The room completely blotted out. Tony couldn’t see or feel his own body. All he knew was Steve.  
Tangled and knotted together, their souls interlaced, merging into something new, something
different, something more. For a bold moment, Steve resisted and their souls retched out a red purple
light and then he accepted it as Tony reached for him. Their souls celebrated, the light blinding and
hot but never burning. And in that horribly beautiful moment, their souls together formed a union and
it pulsed joy and perfection and bliss. Everything around Tony, every sensation, was electrified.
And then the world and Steve whited out.

Panting, Tony came awake in his bed in London, his sleeping pants wet and sticky. He trembled in
the bed and wished to hell and back that he was at home with JARVIS to comfort him. He shivered
and found his way out of the bed. Crossing the room to the bath, Tony dropped his sleeping pants
and quaked. The world seemed inconsequential around him, as if it didn’t truly exist. The place – the
dream space – seemed more real to him than anything.

He went to the shower, turned on the faucets and let the water pound onto him for what seemed like
hours. He stood there, dumbfounded and stunned. He straight armed it onto the shower wall, leaning
his head against his bicep. What the hell was going on? What the hell was wrong with him? These
dreams weren’t even like teenaged fantasies. They were full blown reality chasing altered realities.
He had no idea how to handle any of it. Was dream Steve really Steve? Was he meeting Steve on
some other plane of existence? Was that even possible? Was he just going crazy?

Even with the hot water cascading over him, he still shook like he was standing outside in the chilled
and sleeting rain. God, what a fuck up he’d become. He scrubbed at his face, cleaned his hair, his
entire body. Once he was done, he turned off the faucets and pulled a towel from the rack. He stood
there, in the marble shower with the towel pressed to his face. He pushed it into his eyes until stars
burst. He wanted that reality or whatever the hell it was. He wanted it to be real – somehow. He
wished for Steve to want him like that and not see him as some deviant or perversion of normal –
whatever the hell normal was.

He had to admit, Steve had come around a bit lately. Since the cabin, he seemed more open to Tony,
more willing to accept the fated Beloved bond. But how much and how deep, Tony still didn’t
know. Tony had to get this whole thing, the whole dreamscape farce, out of his head. In a few hours
he would be attending a funeral. He surely didn’t need to be pondering the possibilities of wandering
around dreamland hoping to fuck Captain America again.

Promising himself that he would put it all aside, Tony checked the time and decided to get breakfast
ordered and dressed for the funeral. After he ordered he pulled out his phone and read a few text
messages from Pepper and from R&D. Pepper’s wasn’t urgent and nothing R&D did without him
was urgent either. So he went to toss the phone when another text came through.

*Do you want to ride over together?*

Steve. Tony frowned. How awkward would that be? But then again, Steve didn’t know that Tony
was having hyper-realistic dreams about him so it would still be innocent enough. He texted a yes to
Steve and answered the tap on his door. In his expensive black pants and a black shirt, he ushered
the waiter into the room, paid the fee, and sent him on this way. Mainly he drank the coffee and ate
the melon slices. He wasn’t very hungry. Death and funerals did that to him.

When it was time, he put on his cufflinks and his black silk tie. Tony went across the hall and
knocked on Steve’s door. It swung open to Steve with his own suit with white shirt and his wrecked
expression that took Tony’s breath away. The pain hadn’t leaked through the bond and that only
meant that Steve spent a ton of energy trying to protect the rest of the pack from his upset. Not having any of that shit, Tony moved into the room and took Steve into his arms. For a second, Steve didn’t react but then he wrapped his arms around Tony.

“It’s okay to share it, Steve. We’re here for you,” Tony murmured. Steve didn’t reply, not verbally, but the wall he’d constructed between himself and the rest of the pack disintegrated and the flood of pain and loss hit Tony. He gripped onto Steve. “That’s it. We’re here for you.” His voice sounded strange, off, as if he listened to it from very far away.

When he stepped away from Steve, Tony glimpsed terror in his eyes. What he feared, Tony could only guess. Steve cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders as if he wanted his shield to be there on his back. “Thank you.” It was formal, it was polite, and it was not right on any level.

“Don’t give me that thanks and shit. I got your back. We got your back. You understand that?”

A curl of a smile hit Steve’s lips and he bobbed his head. “Yeah, I got it.” He closed his eyes for a moment, the bond settled. When he opened his eyes again, the ruin of his features fixed itself – righted like a cubist painting slotting into place and turning into a classical one. “Okay, let’s go.”

Each step, each moment, of the next hour became a trial. Tony could not imagine any universe where the team, Steve’s pack, his family wouldn’t accompany him and hold him up. As a pall bearer, Steve held rigid but his expression betrayed him. The ruin reverberated through the bond. Sam, sitting next to Tony, kept his hands in fists as the tide of Steve’s sorrow crested and fell over and over again. Natasha held onto the pew in front of them as if she might bolt over the heads of the mourners and jump to Steve’s defense. Clint stayed close to Bruce, though he seemed the least perturbed. What Tony received from Bruce through the bond could only be described as still waters against the storm. All of their focus, every one of them, centered on Steve. The problem was that it was erratic, chaotic without all the variables resolving to a solution. Each of them were trying their best and in their own way to help Steve, but a team needed a strategy. Bruce was right in many ways they were a chemical reaction headed toward chaos. But to Tony, it was a simple problem with one answer. They needed to direct their energies, their souls to Steve’s.

As Steve made his way back down the aisle and to their pew, Sam stood up and grasped his hand, bringing him to sit between Tony and Sam. Steve sat and his expression collapsed. Sam kept a hold on Steve’s hand and Tony clasped the other one. He’d never really tried to do anything major with the bond, but Tony closed his eyes and sank deep into thrumming that felt like it existed far away. Yet as he allowed it to consume him it grew in intensity and depth. He felt the different waves as if a variety of instruments played their own melodies around him. It shouldn’t be difficult. Music was the expression of mathematics in a way. Souls must be the same thing. He reached inside as if he stood in the middle of his laboratory with JARVIS’ holographic displays around him. He saw and listened to each song, and then identified them as he assessed the music. The deep sonorous sounds came from Bruce, and mirroring that the song of Natasha not unlike that of a cello. He touched them and they stopped, almost surprised but then welcomed his invitation and accepted it. He wove them together as he tilted toward the next sounds – those of Sam whose song reminded him of flight of Beethoven’s 3rd symphony. He used Sam as the anchor and then moved to find Clint’s that pulsed with a beat to keep the rhythm. Finally, he sought his own and what he found there surprised him. Not the beat, not the melody, but something that began to tie them together. And when he connected with Steve’s core, the harmony of their energies synchronized and, sitting next to him, Steve gasped a low intake of air.

Tony orchestrated it, but then each of the members of the pack brought together something stronger, something more beautiful, something united. Steve was their leader, their guardian, and his soul vibrated with their energies. Tony had often heard about religious people calling for lifting up
someone in distress, but this – this was what happened. Throughout the service, each of them comforted Steve, each of them lent him their energy to hold onto the day and see it through to the end. Each of them offered and gave. As the service wound down, Tony lightly untangled the threads of their united soul to the individual ones and he watched as each of his pack members sighed a long exhale and then blinked as if coming awake.

The church emptied out but they all stayed silent and waiting. When Steve finally spoke, he said, “Thank you. I didn’t know that was possible.” All the other mourners had left the church, going to the burial.

“Well, we didn’t either,” Natasha said with a half grin. As they stood in the aisle in the quiet church, she added, “Thank your Beloved for that.”

Steve met Tony’s gaze and his gratitude shone not only through his eyes but through the bond as well. While they were not woven together, they were all still linked. “How did you know? How did you know how to do that?”

Tony shook his head and shrugged. “It felt like a math problem to me so I just did what was natural.”

“And you solved it?” Clint tsked. “I cannot believe it.”

“I think we should get moving,” Sam commented, his eyes on Steve.

They all agreed and started toward the doors. The clouds hung in the sky and Tony thought it appropriate, but then he glimpsed a man on the sidewalk awaiting them.

“Thor?” Steve said.

“I am sorry I missed the service for your loved one,” Thor said. He wore civilian clothes, a black suit with a dark maroon shirt. Mjolnir was nowhere to be seen.

“Thank you for coming. I didn’t know if you were on Earth.”

Thor said. “Heimdall told me of your need. And, for now, I am here for you, Steven.” He clasped Steve to him in a bear hug that even made Steve look small and frail. In some ways he was fragile and Tony only cringed inwardly as Thor jostled Steve. “My brother, my friend.”

Steve handled it, but the threads of his soul shook like leaves in the wind. He was at his breaking point. Tony went to support him, to reach out and touch him at the moment that Steve broke away from Thor but slid Steve’s hand down and grasped Thor’s hand. The reaction and bonding flared and Steve stumbled – the strength of it so brash, so potent that he nearly went down to the ground. Shocks of blue fire crackled around their hands and Tony flinched away as Steve stated, “Guide.”

An arc of raw energy sparked between them before Thor staggered back and trembled. Steve fumbled for purchase and Tony grabbed his arm and threw a hand around his waist to keep him upright. The bonding drained Steve, and his face paled. Bruce helped shore up Steve, supporting him from the other side.

Thor looked at them, bewildered. He tugged up his sleeve to find the swirl of the mark on his arm. “What devilry is this?”

“No devilry,” Bruce said and held up a hand in surrender. “I didn’t think it would work with you.”

“It’s universal,” Tony said. “Why wouldn’t it.” Thor furrowed his brows at Tony as Steve tried for a smile but didn’t quite manage it. “Well, Thor, welcome to the pack.”
“Pack?” He thrust his marked arm forward and demanded, “By all our forefathers and foremothers you will tell me how you marked me! We know of this on Asgard but it is a rare thing indeed.”

“Well, that’s a long story,” Tony said, but glanced up at Steve as he listed to the side. “But I think we have to attend to our leader first.”

Unguarded, Steve showed exposed gratitude to Tony, but more than that it spread out to the bond between them and only them. It fastened them together and began to stitch something different, something unexpected between them.

“Yeah, welcome to the pack,” Tony repeated but he couldn’t take his eyes off of Steve.

Chapter End Notes

Due to my schedule and trying to finish up the rest of my Cap-IronMan RBB, I will post the next chapter of Beloved between 27 May - 3 June. I have not been able to revise as quickly as I hoped. Sorry for the delay. After that I will be posting weekly again until the story is complete! Thank you for your patience. Only 6 more chapters to go!

Also, for everyone who wished me well for my surgery, thank you! I'm feeling a lot better now - just wish I had been able to write more during my recovery. Who knew I'm be out of it for so long??? But all is well now! :) Hope you like this chapter!
Dreams

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony share a dream and suddenly reality shifts....

Chapter Notes

I want to say thank you for all the comments, feedback, and kudos. If I haven't answered your comment yet, I apologize. I am working on getting to all of them very soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maybe it had been the funeral. Or maybe it had been the fact that the universe decided to replace Peggy on the day of her burial, but everything closed in on Steve so fast that he clung to Tony as if he was a life line. After the funeral and the service at the side of her grave, Tony ushered all of them back to the hotel. Thor followed along, confused, a little mortified, and not a little pissed off about the soul bond. Steve didn’t even try to explain, though he knew it was his duty as the team leader, as the pack leader, to help each and every member along. Yet, Tony hushed him and told him to allow the rest of the pack to take care of things.

Steve ended up in the lavish hotel room with its tall columns and marble tiled bathroom. Once he sat on the bed and Tony left him, Steve slumped down and fell to stare at the ceiling. Most of the time he managed his dissociation – managed might be a strong word for it. He admitted to himself it was more like ignoring it, pushing himself, keeping busy so he wouldn’t have to face the fact that his whole world changed in a blink of an eye. Sometimes only those moments before he crashed the Valkyrie into the ocean were real to him.

He laid on the bed and closed his eyes, remembering those moments of before.

The shades of memory materialized not like echoes but vibrant and real.

*There's not gonna be a safe landing, but I can try and force it down.* The grip of the flight controls in his hands, the wind on his face from the broken cockpit window washed over him even as the perfect room about him stayed safe, stayed sane – which he couldn’t say he was anymore.

And then her voice came to him. *I'll-I'll get Howard on the line. He'll know what to do.*

He spoke the next words out loud as if he’d only said them yesterday. “There's not enough time. This thing’s moving too fast and it's heading for New York. I gotta put her in the water.”

His answer whispered to him, through the ages, through the dark of the waters and the ice. *Please don't do this. W-we have time. We can work it out.*

He allowed the feelings to tide over him like a ritual, a rite of passage, as he said goodbye to his last love. He murmured the reply, “Right now I'm in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer a lot of people are gonna die. Peggy, this is my choice.” It was his choice, but it had never been his choice
not to die. He had said his farewells to this good Earth and all its people, to its problems and strife and war. He had given his life to save others and he didn’t expect this new life as his reward.

Instead of playing out the rest, instead of calling out to Peggy, he turned to his soul bond – this foreign thing that infected him, split his soul into so many others and linked him to this new world. Today, Tony changed it. He did something wondrous and terrifying. He manipulated the strings and chords of their souls together. Tony had done it purposefully, not accidentally like all of the times Steve had called out or changed things. Steve had always been a fast learner, had always hungered to learn. Even in the depths of poverty he sought knowledge. He’d learned as much as he could about the soul pack, about the bonds that brought them together – but that was like being book smart as his mother would say. He needed more practical experience. The thing inside of him, the bond tethering him to so many others, became not a drag or an anchor, but a beacon to him. He focused through the lanes of the energy. He could call out to Sam or Natasha or any one of them.

“Go ahead and call out to him.” The voice sounded young again, as if the Peggy he knew spoke to him, as if her ghost hovered over him.

He refused to open his eyes; if she wasn’t there he would hurt all the more. Instead, he sank into the bonds and called out, did what seemed natural. It ricocheted back to him, yet it wasn’t him – it was Tony answering in a quiet way. There were no words or analytical thoughts, just the impression of movement and possibilities and emotion. The last comforted and offered solace. Even as Steve accepted it, his mind yanked him back – away from it. His eyes snapped open and he sat up. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t reach out to Tony that way even though it seemed so natural, so right.

The dreams that haunted him came back to jeer at him. The dreams were erotic, so sexual and so detailed. Their physicality overwhelmed him. The tenement apartment, Tony lying next to him, Tony breaching him. As he thought about it, he grew hard and the shame ached through him. What was wrong with him?

The soul pack – the bond – had polluted him. He curled his hands over his face.

“Don’t.”

He didn’t look because it was Peggy again, her hand perched on his shoulder. “Don’t deny yourself happiness.”

His hands dropped and he turned away, afraid to look at the phantom of his love. “It’s wrong.”

“Has it felt wrong all those times in the dream?” she asked. Her hand remained on his shoulder. It felt real and tender.

Swallowing, he shook his head and the hot tears fell down his face. The pain robbed him of his voice. Her weight shifted and then a light kiss touched his cheek.

“Be happy, Steve.” Her presence dissipated, and Steve trembled with the chill left in the air. He glanced around as if he might catch a glimpse of her, some evidence that in fact she had visited him from beyond the grave. Only the opulent room surrounded him.

He stood up and shuffled to the bathroom. Turning on the faucets he bent over the sink and threw the cool water on his face, ran it through his hair, and then gripped the counter. His eyes landed on the scarring along his arm. He never really looked at it anymore. Not the band that marked him first as leader, and not the many brands that scarred his whole arm, with Tony’s traveling up to his chest. He shrugged off the suit jacket and the shirt and tie. He tossed his undershirt to the floor and stared at the markings – soul scars – over his arm and on his torso and chest. He hadn’t admitted it to himself or to
anyone, but the one on his chest – Tony’s mark – grew and flourished every time he had one of those potent dreams. Across his whole chest and down his torso the markings stretched. Complex geometric figures and patterns. He wondered if Tony had the same markings and if so how far they went.

He let his hand drift over his chest, touching the intricate design. What did the universe have in store for him? Did he have free will anymore? Was he just a cog in the machinations of the universe? This wasn’t him. He wasn’t maudlin, and he didn’t overly analyze his own actions and purpose in life. He’d spent time evaluating the soul pack and bond, but he never questioned who he was or what his motives were. He washed his face again and dried it, trying to put away his fears and his doubts as he did. He gathered up his discarded clothes and hung them in the closet in the bedroom. Mechanically, he took off his pants and hung them as well. He found the provided robe in the closet and touched it. It wasn’t in him to waste his time and laze around in a posh robe.

Shaking his head, Steve went to his suitcase and pulled out his track pants and a t-shirt. Surely the hotel had somewhere to workout. Once dressed he found the work out room tucked next to an Olympic sized pool. Steve stared at the pool for a while, thinking maybe he should just swim instead, but part of him – a quiet part that people didn’t know – hated the water. He remembered the gagging, as the ocean burst into the Valkyrie and the rush of water like a freight train slamming into him. His breath turned fluid and he drowned as the ice of the water chilled his bones. With that in mind, he went to the work out room. He couldn’t hit punching bags because he would end up paying for the ruined ones. Instead he took to the weights and began his repetitions.

When he started on his second hundred a face appeared over the bar. “Really, you’re gonna do this?” Not being in a position to shrug, Steve only flicked an eyebrow at Sam and then said, “Need to clear my mind.”

“What about the Mantra?” Sam asked as Steve eased the bar down onto the support bracket.

“Sometimes it’s more about getting away from the Mantra.” Steve slipped out from under the weights and sat up as Sam handed him a towel.

“Come on. Did you see they have a juice bar that makes smoothies?” Sam thumbed toward the door behind them.

“No, I did not see that,” Steve said and wiped his face and neck. He followed Sam, tossing the towel in the bin as they passed it. Just outside the workout room, the juicer bar curved along the wall. When they walked up to it, a young man asked for their order. Steve glanced up at the menu, too many different choices.

“For my friend here, he’ll have a mango with an extra power pump. I’ll go berry with just the regular power pump,” Sam said. “Extra large for him. Large for me. Charge it to the room. 502.” The man nodded and began to prepare their drinks. Sam smiled at Steve. It wasn’t one of joy but of understanding. “Been a long few days.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed and then frowned. “Power pump?”

“Just extra vitamins and crap. Makes you feel good about drinking a smoothie.” He picked up his cup as it was placed on the counter. “Try it. You’ll like it.”

Steve quirked an eyebrow at him but took the large cup with straw from the counter, thanking the man. Sam ushered them over to a seating area for the gym. Steve took a chair and settled as Sam sat across from him. They sipped their drinks before Sam said, “How are you holding up?”
Steve leaned forward and placed the drink on the table between them. He really didn’t want to do this. “As good as can be expected?”

“Now don’t give me that shit,” Sam said. “We can all feel that you’re hiding from something. I just can’t figure out what.”

“Is this really necessary?” Steve glanced over at the weights, at the rest of the workout equipment. He’d come here to beat away his sorrows, to recover from the passage of time that he had no control over. He hadn’t come to hide. Or had he?

“I think it is,” Sam said. “If Stark can really pull off what he did in the church, then we have a leader whose suffering. I’m not one to leave that fact hanging like a thread.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s not that simple.” Could he bare his soul to Sam? Did Sam already know, considering that his life had been intertwined with Sam’s by some universal force? “You know I consider you a companion, Sam. I’m not only talking about Companion as in soul pack, but that I considered you a friend before you accepted being in the pack.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. He waited. He had the ability to read people and know when it was time to speak and when it was time to listen and to wait.

“You’re the only one I ever intentionally bonded to.” Steve played with the cup on the table. The condensation made little droplets down the side of the cup. “It’s not supposed to work that way, but it did. I’m glad.” He looked up at Sam. “I’m glad and it would -.” He stopped. Speaking his emotions would always be difficult for Steve. “It would tear me apart if something I did or said changed that.”

Sam edged closer. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“This is Steve Rogers talking not Captain America,” Steve added. He needed Sam (of all people) to differentiate the two.

Sam gave a short nod. “Okay, I got that. What’s going on, Steve?” The intentional use of his name helped Steve recognize that Sam took his words to heart.

Looking directly at Sam became a problem. To sink so low that he couldn’t face his friend nearly stopped him from saying anything, but when he did glance up, Sam offered nothing but open and honest compassion. “I’ve been, I’ve been dreaming. A lot.”

“Okay, we all dream.” Sam kept the smart remarks to himself.

“Not like this,” Steve said and sat back, away from Sam. “Not even close to this. It’s real or it feels very real. I think it might have something to do with the soul bond.”

“You’re telling me that since you had this soul bond thing all your dreams are realistic?” Sam furrowed his brows and studied Steve; just by the look on his face Steve knew that Sam had an inkling that wasn’t the endpoint.

“No, just these dreams I keep having about-.” He swallowed down his pride, his fear, his anxiety, his revulsion, and yes, his excitement. “About Tony. The dreams – the real ones all involve Tony.”

Sam stared at him a moment longer, not moving and then it hit him. A smile spread across his face and he reached over to slap Steve on the knee. “Well, hot damn, you got it good.”

“No, no,” Steve said and then he recalled the ghost of Peggy speaking to him, or maybe it was just a
half-remembered feeling of her. “Yes, like that.”

“This is good. This is fine,” Sam said. “I’m happy for you.” Then he stopped and read Steve like a book. “But you’re not happy for you. Oh, I get it. You think it’s wrong.”

“Yes, no, no,” Steve said and then put his face in his hands. He felt like a kid again. Often, he’d come home to his mother and their cold flat. She’d see his bloody nose and cradle his face in her hands. He dropped his hands. “When I was a kid, I always thought I was a disappointment to my mom. She always treated me like I was a prince, but it was hard for her dealing with a kid with so many ailments.”

“That doesn’t make you a disappointment,” Sam said. “I don’t believe the mother of Steve Rogers would be that judgmental.”

“No, she wasn’t. But,” Steve said and stopped. What was his point? “Today, you don’t see things like this as an ailment. Back then? Well, we did.” He settled back onto the chair. He let his body go lax, he needed to stop tensing up. “But my mom.” He shook his head. “She was full of surprises. She invited the bachelor gentlemen over for dinner. The ones that lived across the hallway. She did things like that. She knew more than I gave her credit for.”

“But you didn’t know?” Sam prodded, but it was gentle and not intrusive.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Steve shrugged. He’d spoken a little about this with Natasha, trying to feel his way around the issue. All of his friends accepted him. Why couldn’t he accept himself? “I mean, Bucky set me up all the time, but it never clicked. I blamed it on being small and sickly. Then I got – well – you know this. And I ended up on tour with the USO girls.” He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. The explosion of light reminded him of the flash bulbs from all the cameras going off when he was on tour. He looked at Sam again. “I always felt like an idiot around those girls. Never really knew what to say.”

“But you fell for Peggy,” Sam said. Everyone knew the story, the love story.

“Yeah, hook, line, and sinker,” Steve said with a smile. “She was everything to me. And she made the fears go away. The anxieties, the questions.”

“Questions about who you were?”

Steve licked his lips. He’d never truly thought about it. Introspection wasn’t one of his hobbies. He’d rather keep busy, do the mission, make himself useful. “I don’t know? I mean I was attracted to Peggy, but-.” He never really considered it, before now.

“But you kind of like Stark, too.”

Steve cursed the heat of his blush but only nodded to Sam.

“You’re discovering. What – how old are you?” He put his hands up to halt Steve. “And don’t give me any of that 95 crap.”

“If you go by my biology, I’m gonna be twenty-seven,” Steve said. “Seems to me all the kids these days figure this stuff out in their teens.”

“Well, you were busy being sick,” Sam said as he ticked them off on his fingers. “Being a soldier, being dead. So, we can give you a pass that you didn’t exactly figure out that you are bi.”

“Bi?”
“Bisexual. You like gals and guys.”

Steve sighed. “This is so much more complicated than I’m used to.”

Sam laughed. “More complicated than being in a soul pack? It might not feel right because of when you grew up, but it probably fits better than trying to pretend, doesn’t it?”

The brush of Tony’s hot skin next to his, the taste of his tongue and mouth, the caress of callused hands down his flank shifted through Steve’s consciousness. Every moment of the dreams felt only seconds away as if he’d only just experienced them. “Some.”

“Steve, you gotta admit what’s happening here,” Sam said, and he laid on hand on Steve’s shoulder. “There’s nothing wrong with it. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Is the universe deciding I’m gay?” Steve asked.

“Is it?”

Steve had to admit his attraction to Tony started before the soul pack brand even appeared on his wrist. Sure, he fought and debated with Tony, but that didn’t take away from the fact that his pulse heightened and he grew excited about the opportunity to be around him.

Sam continued. “Maybe it’s not the universe. Maybe it’s you. Maybe you’re trying to tell yourself something. You really think that some all-powerful force is aligning everything in your life and that you have no say in it. Phew, there goes freewill out the window?”

Sam had a point, Steve had to admit. When he gave that speech at the Triskelion, there were good people there, people not part of his pack – Sharon amongst them – who stood up and took a stand. The soul pack and the universe didn’t determine everything. “So you think our souls aligned. Before it was chance, but this – this was our doing.”

Sam drank down his smoothie. “You tell me. But really, I think you’re the luckiest guy in the world. You already know. The rest of us poor shmucks? We have no idea. We have to fumble around in the dark. Really, you’re lucky.”

Before Steve could answer, the door to the workout area of the hotel swung open and Tony charged in. “Oh, for God’s sake, there you are. Shit, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I thought maybe you jumped off the building or fucking put yourself in the hotel freezer.” Steve jerked in surprise as Sam chuckled. “It’s bad enough the Prince of Hammers is still having a fit about the soul mark – which I have to admit you might need to deal with it because Bruce and Thor together it’s getting very, very weird. Reminds me of a buddy cop comedy gone horribly wrong.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve said.

Tony ran his hands through his hair. His disheveled look, his roaming eyes, and the jittery feeling through the soul bond spoke loud and clear of his anxiety. “I put you to bed. You were supposed to be resting. I was fucking worried about you!”

“And that is my signal to say goodbye,” Sam said and stood up, grabbed his drink, and left.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Tony,” Steve said. “I needed to get some of my energy out. I felt like my nerves might explode. I just needed some time.” He stood up. The bundle of energy still crackled through him and shuddered through the soul bond.

Tony’s brow popped up. “Wow! You aren’t joking are you?”
“You could have reached out through the bond to find me,” Steve said. “I would have answered.”

Tony ran his hands through his hair and frowned. “Well somethings I suppose just aren’t second nature yet.”

Steve shuffled his feet. “Sorry. I’m sorry to worry you. I’m a little off my game with the Mantra. I should try and get some time to regulate again.”

“Well, if you don’t mind the company, maybe we could get something to eat and, like, do the Mantra thing together?” Tony said. His eyes were hopeful, but at the same time Steve glimpsed the shadow of the ‘other Tony’, the one the world saw on a daily basis. He lurked on the perimeter, waiting for Steve to shoot him down. The ‘other Tony’ would appear and that fake smile would be plastered on his face and he would shrug off Steve’s dismissal.

“Actually, that would be nice. I’d like some company, especially now.” The conversation he’d just finished with Sam rang in Steve’s head, and he smiled. The thought that maybe he was discovering something about himself, something new about himself in this new age, seemed appropriate in some odd way. “Do you want to go out to get something to eat?” That sounded suspiciously like he was asking Tony out on a date, so he rushed ahead and said, “Because I need to clean up first.”

Tony glanced around and blinked a few times. “If you don’t mind some room service again? I’m a little - off?”

Okay, room service it is,” Steve agreed. Part of him relaxed but a deeper part panged with disappointment. He picked up the empty cup and disposed of it as they exited the gym area of the hotel. Walking through the hotel, Steve tried to ignore the electric undercurrent between them. Clearing his throat, he asked, “So Thor isn’t taking it well?”


“Yeah, he’s not the only one,” Steve said. Any other assignment wouldn’t have hurt quite so much, but to have Peggy so quickly replaced jabbed hot pokers into his chest. He turned away from Tony as the tears stung his eyes. He’d done enough crying – he needed to get it under control.

Yet, a hand rested on his arm as they stepped up to the elevator. “It’s not going away overnight.”

Steve gritted his teeth and nodded. He wasn’t angry, not with Tony, but maybe with himself a little. “It’s okay. I’ll get over it.”

“Fuck, man, you don’t have to get over it.” The elevator arrived but Tony moved into Steve’s path and put his hand up to stop him. “Peggy was important to you. You can be upset. I’m telling you that.”

“Well, the damned universe didn’t think she was that important considering it didn’t even wait until she was in the ground to name a new Guide,” Steve hissed back. The tears threatened again and his voice broke as he spoke. Every part of him screamed in defiance of the universe. Of it wanting to name a new guide, of it pushing these new feelings to the surface. Yet at the same time, he wanted to succumb to it. He shook his head and looked away. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Okay, don’t worry about it. You’re not the first person to blow off steam at me,” Tony said. “And no, that’s not me being a martyr. Everyone gets the short end of the stick sometimes. It’s nice to think I get it from Captain America.”
Steve smirked as they entered the elevator. “Let’s call that one on Steve Rogers right now.”

“If you say so,” Tony said, and the elevator doors closed. For several moments he remained quiet but then he turned to Steve and asked, “How do you do that? I mean, you see yourself as Captain America or Steve Rogers. Not one and the same. Me? I’m Iron Man, but the suit and I are one.”

Steve frowned. Tony’s circumstances were different than his. “You invented Iron Man, used it to save yourself as I understand it. Captain America was a persona, a movie character before anything else. It’s easy to dissociate myself from it.”

“So you could drop the shield and feel complete?”

Steve focused on Tony. “Yes. Believe it or not, I’ve thought about it more than once. The shield – it’s a duty but it doesn’t define me.”

“Steve Rogers made Captain America who he is, I don’t think anyone else could do that,” Tony said as the doors to the elevator slid open. “It’s amazing.”

“I think you give me too much credit,” Steve said. “Everyone does. Sam, Nat, you.”

“Maybe you don’t give yourself enough,” Tony said as they headed toward his suite instead of Steve’s rooms. It seemed natural, right, that Steve wouldn’t even wonder why. “Did you ever think about your designation in this whole pack thing? I mean I know you worry about all the titles you’ve given us. From Thor as a Guide to those twins as Family, and then me as Beloved.” He waved the key card over the interface and the door unlocked. “But what about leader? You think about that?”

Steve stepped through as Tony welcomed him into his suite of rooms. “Not really.”

Tony smiled and winked at Steve. “Maybe you should.”

Those simple words set in motion a new path to venture down. Steve cringed to himself and ground his teeth. Another question was all that he needed right now. He should probably excuse himself and just go and get the Mantra over with, though Wong repeatedly taught him that the Mantra wasn’t burden, a chore to be completed but something to find solace and comfort and mindfulness in. It took months to figure it out.

“Yeah, maybe,” Steve murmured as Tony led the way into the suite. They went toward the sitting room. Steve liked the comfort of the room, but at the same time he missed feeling at home. Yet he knew he hadn’t felt like that in ages. “So, do we want to work on the Mantra first?”

“All work and no play, huh?” Tony said as he went to the stone and marble bar to the side of the sitting room. It partitioned off a glass table and chairs that Steve presumed was for dining. The floor to ceiling windows near the table set would offer a grand view of Hyde Park during dinner.

“Sorry, I just need to get my head on straight,” Steve said with a shrug. “If you don’t want to-.”

“No, no,” Tony said and gestured for Steve to sit. “Would you like something?”

“No,” Steve said. He sat on the couch in the same place he’d sat the night before when they ate burgers and drank shakes. Elbows on knees, he clasped his hands together. “I think I need to focus on the Mantra.”

“Okay,” Tony said. He placed his tumbler filled with an amber liquid on the coffee table. “Let’s start. When Bruce taught me it was just kind of a chant. I talked with Strange a little too. He was unbearable and not helpful much at all.”
“Tell me about it. Wong is so much better,” Steve agreed. “Do you want to just try and chant or should we?”

Tony shook out his shoulders and then his arms. “I think we relax a little, get comfy, and then close our eyes.”

“Okay.” Steve couldn’t see the harm in it. Letting Tony take the lead on this felt right. After all, he did that trick in the church where he linked them altogether to support Steve. Tony had an innate skill for soul bonds.

Steve rotated his shoulders, stretched out his arms and then sat back on the couch. “Okay, ready.”

“Starting with the Mantra, because I mean – why not?” Tony twisted up his mouth and quirked his brows at Steve. “The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.”

Steve listened to Tony – the way his voice tripped over the words, skipping as if they were inconsequential to the Mantra itself. In some ways, he was right. Steve followed along, muttering the Mantra himself. “The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.”

He sank into the Mantra, listening to Tony speak it as if he flew – as if he rushed toward some untouchable goal. At first, the way Tony chanted the Mantra gave the impression that he didn’t much care, that it was a chore he needed to do and that he hated it – but truth existed beneath the surface. Steve followed, dove deep through the bond. With powerful strokes, he moved through the Mantra to seek out and find the waves of the bond. It wasn’t difficult, the way that Tony showed him with the words, the cadence of his words. It might not be a traditional chant, but it entranced and elevated with a hint of joyful playfulness. It occurred to Steve that this must be the way that Tony felt while flying in the armor.

Steve found himself closing his eyes and letting the words wash over him. The audacity of the way Tony spoke the Mantra, not with reverence but with a challenge, a dare in his tone, filled Steve with pride. Tony wasn’t going to be cowed by the idea of a soul bond, of the universe’s hold on him. Instead, he thumbed his nose at it. Steve kind of loved it. He followed the words until their inevitable end.

“So, are you here too or did I fall asleep again?”

Before Steve opened his eyes, he said, “Yeah, I’m still here.”

“Steve, open your eyes,” Tony said.

Steve did as Tony asked and then immediately shut them again. He must have fallen asleep and drifted into the dream space again. He willed himself to wake up, while at the same time dream Tony said, “Yeah, I think this might be real.”

It didn’t work. When he opened his eyes again, Steve glanced around, and he sat in the bed in the tenement’s bedroom. His chest was bare, and he hated to think about what he might be wearing – or not wearing- under the thin sheet laying over his legs. Tony stood to the side of the bed, thankfully donned sleeping pants but not much else. Steve glimpsed the arc reactor scar on his chest which wove into the brand from the soul mark. The scar became the focal point like the sun radiating out within the brand. Like Steve’s the brand covered his whole chest and down his torso.

“This isn’t happening,” Steve said. He wanted to believe it was just a dream. It must be. He had been emotionally exhausted and hadn’t rested since he found out about Peggy, and then having Thor named as one of the pack – as the Guide – threw him.
“Sure feels like it is,” Tony said, and then he glanced around the room. “Or I’m dreaming and you’re in my dream.”

“We never really talk about the dream,” Steve muttered. He wanted to get out of bed, pace, walk around, but then he realized he was nude. “I fell asleep. That’s all this is.”

“Okay, yeah,” Tony said and ran his hands through his hair, mussing it. Then he cupped them over his mouth and blew out. “I only sipped my drink. I’m not even drunk. I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

That made no sense – why was dream Tony saying he was asleep? “I don’t remember it being like this before.” In the dream, it had almost always been as if they were lovers in a different time and place. They talked quietly, they loved passionately, but they didn’t question the existence or non-existence of this place.

“Neither do I,” Tony said and placed a hand on his chest. He rubbed at his scar and then walked over to the window. As he stood in profile, Steve caught the grimace.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked. He desperately wanted to get up, to put his hands on Tony’s shoulders, to bring him back to bed. It’s just a dream – a dream he was having while sleeping in Tony’s hotel room.

Tony turned around and glared at him. “I don’t know, you tell me. This whole thing is getting weird. I mean, this afternoon I’m sitting in church and I got my fingers in everyone’s astral projections or souls. And now, I’m – fuck – where am I?”

“My tenement flat in Brooklyn right after my mother died,” Steve said. He smoothed the sheet over his lap. “I lived here until I couldn’t anymore. I had to give it up when I got too sick and couldn’t work. Ended up getting a small basement room. Bucky wanted me to move in with them, but I didn’t want to be a bother.”

“Christ,” Tony said and settled at the foot of the bed. That seemed wrong. From the many different times he’d visited Tony in the dream space, there had been an intimacy that extended to the emotional, not only the physical. For Tony to sit far away, with his back partially to Steve felt odd, wrong, off. “Couldn’t afford it anymore?”

“It wasn’t much, but I couldn’t,” Steve said. “We went through what we were able to save when Ma got sick. I couldn’t make the rent a few months in a row. Old man Miller needed the money too. So I left.”

“Kind of feel like this is the last time we’re going to be here,” Tony said. His shoulders were slumped, curled forward. “Gonna miss it. I didn’t have a place like this.”

Steve chuckled. “Oh, you mean cheap and cold in the winter?”

Tony twisted around to meet Steve’s eyes. “No, thank God, no. But it feels – I mean the decorations, the bed, the furniture – it feels like home.”

Steve wanted to reach out to Tony; he would in the dream space. Why wouldn’t he now? This was the dream space, wasn’t it? He extended his hand, leaving his palm open to Tony. “It felt like home to me too. Probably the one I miss the most.”

Tony stared at the offered hand. In so many ways the room around Steve vibrated. The differences solidified around him. In any dream, Tony would take Steve’s hand, hold it, maybe bring it to his lips. Kiss, and then it would lead to touch, and a caress, and more. Steve found himself holding his breath both hungering for Tony to touch his hand and dreading it all the same. For some reason,
Steve could both convince himself that he was in a dream and that the reality around him had substance.

Hesitating, Tony reached out and laid his hand on Steve. “You have a home, you know. I made you a home.”

Steve closed his fingers gently over Tony’s lax hand. “I know,” he said thinking of the floor in the Tower in New York. It hadn’t really been his home, not truly. It was a place he stayed. The whole of this new world to him rankled with a foreignness that both beguiled and bemused but also terrified.

“You know,” Tony said and let out an exhale. “You say that like it’s a burden. Like I did it to force you to be around me.”

“You know that’s not true,” Steve said, and he almost referred to their many times here in this dream space. Why wasn’t he? In the dream he would, he would tell Tony – I would never think of you as a burden. But the words died in his mouth and tasted of ash and dirt. He felt all the more bereft because of his own inaction.

Tony studied him for a moment before he said, “This isn’t how this is supposed to go.”

The words shocked Steve like a ram to the heart. “What?”

“If this were how I – how it is supposed to go, then you and I would be in this bed together. We’d kiss and hold each other. But this– this feels wrong. Off.”

For a second, the world splintered, and Steve saw the different version of it. Like a mirror shattered to shards all around him, he witnessed the jagged remains. Reflections of slightly different versions of himself, of Tony, of their life. He saw Tony sitting there with a slump to his shoulders and a quizzical eye as if he didn’t believe anything at all. He saw Tony curled next to him in the bed, close and comforting. In the distance like a bird song he heard the Mantra spoken over and again.

*The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.*

It drifted in and out of his consciousness.

Before he understood what he was doing, he clasped Tony’s hand and hauled him across the width of the bed. Tony didn’t move for a moment and Steve could have forced his hand, but he didn’t, and Tony shifted and then on his knees walked over the bed to Steve’s side. In for a penny, in for a pound, as his mother used to say to him, Steve lifted the sheet and ignored his own nudity. He invited Tony into the bed.

With a deep-seated gaze, Tony judged Steve’s offer and then with only the slightest tilt of his head accepted. He slid in next to Steve and then Steve pulled him into his embrace. They lay there like that for several minutes before Steve whispered, “It’s only a dream. I can do this in a dream.”

“A dream,” Tony murmured back. “We don’t fit together so good in real life, huh?”

Steve smiled into the dark waves at the crown of Tony’s head. “Not so much.” Having Tony’s weight on him brought to him a sense of protectiveness as well as security.

“Are we so different?” Tony asked and there was a longing in his voice that mimicked the ache in Steve’s chest.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Steve responded. “I mean, we aren’t from the same background at all, but we both want to do good.”
“We have fiercely loyal friends,” Tony added. “I mean Rhodey would try and kick your ass if you
did anything he didn’t agree with. Might even call you names.”

Steve smiled. “Well, I will try and not get him too upset.”

“Why do you think we fell in love in the dream?” Tony asked.

His body fit against Steve’s perfectly. Something about this place, this separate space, made Steve
wistful and hopeful at the same time. “Perhaps we found one another. We play parts for one another.
We challenge one another.”

“You don’t think it’s just sexual? I mean I know I’m hot,” Tony said with a smirk on his lips. “And
so are you, don’t get me wrong but-.” He stopped, and it was telling.

“No, Tony. I think it’s deeper than that. I know it would be for me.” Steve stroked a hand down
Tony’s back. “When I dreamed of being with someone as a kid-.” He didn’t mention it was always a
woman along society’s norms at the time. “-I always thought it would be for love. That we would
finish each other’s-.”

“Sandwiches!” Tony laughed.

“Yeah, sandwiches,” Steve said with a smile. “We would like to spend time together, just to be with
one another.”

“Hey, I don’t think we qualify for that,” Tony said as his laughter faded, but he didn’t move away.
He snuggled closer.

“Well, I’d love to spend time watching you, learning from you, Tony. It’s always a surprise to me
that scientists and engineers don’t think that people outside of their discipline would be interested.
We are – I am. I might not get all of it, but it’s so enthralling.”

Tony shifted and turned around to look at Steve. “Really, you would like to spend time in the
workshop?”

Steve lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Yeah, why not? I have with Bruce on a rare occasion. Why
wouldn’t I want to do it with you? I would love to find out how you design the Iron Man armor.
What ticks in your head.”

“That’s a surprise,” Tony said. He settled back down into Steve’s embrace. “I just figured you like
to do a routine, that you didn’t have time for stuff like that.”

Steve frowned. “Stuff like what?”

“I don’t know, stuff outside of superhero crap,” Tony said and sighed. “I guess I was wrong?”

“Very much so. There’s a lot of down time. A lot of time to think. Sometimes I don’t want to think
or remember,” Steve said and wondered how he could lie in bed, naked and hold a man. Everything
about it in his learned brain told him that he was breaking norms, but the fact was that he enjoyed the
closeness. He enjoyed Tony. “Sam once asked me what I would do if I got out, stopped serving.
And I couldn’t answer. I didn’t know. For me, I want to know. It’s one of the things I think that’s
missing in me.”

“We can fix that,” Tony said and that made Steve laugh.

“You always want to fix things.”
“I don’t think you need fixing,” Tony answered but the words were low in his throat. “I think you need to let go a little, stop being Captain America.”

“I try. People always see me as Cap, and not much else.”

“Did you think it might be because you don’t show anything or anyone else to them?” Tony sat up. He didn’t take his focus off Steve. “In this dream space I think I’ve gotten to know you better than I ever have in the real world.” Tony winked at him as he glanced over Steve’s body. “Well in more ways than one, but I am trying to make a point here.”

The flush of embarrassment hit him but he kept his eyes on Tony, didn’t shy away. “I get that. I guess I just don’t know who Steve Rogers is anymore.”

“Well, maybe we should remedy that,” Tony said and sank down into his arms.

It felt right then to lift Tony’s chin, to kiss him in this sacred space. Nothing felt wrong here. The dream landscape became a beacon, a homecoming all at once. Steve forgot to think, to question himself. He forgot to restrict himself from the need. He’d learned as a child to be hungry. During the Great Depression, hunger became not part of the vernacular but part of the bones of his body. Questioning hunger would be the same as questioning why he had legs to walk on or eyes to see. Hunger had been a part of his everyday life as a young teenager and as he grew older.

Denying himself the satiation, the experience, grew within him until Steve couldn’t parse the difference. He said he didn’t want this type of love, that he labeled it as deviant and wrong. But he still wanted, he still yearned. Hungry for more, for sustenance had been his life. Why would he change it now? Because he could.

He rolled Tony onto his back and pulled away from him. Tony’s lips were rose red with a glistening of their saliva on the lower one. His pupils were large and dark. His mouth parted slightly and a flick of the tongue sent Steve reeling. He wanted so much of this to be real yet at the same time feared that it would be real. If it was real, those impediments in his head would stop him, give him pause. He wanted none of that. He only wanted to taste Tony. He kissed and licked and let the memories of all the dreams coalesce to teach him Tony’s desires. Steve lingered over Tony’s nipples, teasing and nipping. When Tony shuddered beneath him, Steve rejoiced in the feel of his body responding. He drifted lower and tugged the waist band of Tony’s pants down to reveal his straining erection. His mouth watered at the hardness, the slight curve toward Tony’s belly.

With a lap of his tongue Steve tasted Tony only to make him shiver and whine. Steve couldn’t help but smile in response. So much of this felt natural and real to him. He sucked and then swallowed Tony’s cock, letting it hit the back of his mouth. Tony groaned in response, thrashing against the cheap thin pillows. Steve urged him on, slipping his hands under Tony’s ass and gripping it. He stroked a rhythm with his mouth and tongue as Tony moaned louder, wildly.

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“Steve, Steve!” Tony grabbed for him, holding Steve’s head in place as he pushed further down his throat. In response, Steve swallowed around the thick head of Tony’s cock feeling his throat try and lock up around it. Tony quaked as Steve swallowed again and again.

Following his instincts and his memories of the dream place, Steve teased Tony’s entrance only to have him tremble. Steve swallowed one more time before he opened his mouth and let Tony’s cock drop from his lips. Tony huffed and cried out, but he allowed Steve to flip him over and hoist him up onto his knees. In that position, Steve spread Tony’s ass with his hands and then lapped at his entrance, letting his tongue find its way into Tony.

“Do that, do that again,” Tony sobbed.
Steve slid his tongue into Tony and probed in and out, in and out. Tony grappled, trying to get a
hand on his aching cock, but Steve slapped him away. He took Tony in hand as his tongue entered
him. Steve fucked him with his tongue and pumped him with his hand until Tony went insane from
the need. He pounded into Steve’s hand, begging for release. Each time he came close, Steve would
let up a little, loosen his hand, and Tony would only whimper a little more. The sound delighted
Steve, threw him deeper into the dream, the promise, caused his straining cock to drip copious
amounts of come.

“Please, Steve, please!”

Steve released him then and sidled underneath Tony. Looking up at Tony as he panted over him,
Steve opened his mouth and then gulped down Tony again. This time Tony couldn’t hold back and
as soon as Steve worked his throat around his swollen cock, he came. Steve swallowed as much as it
could of the bitter seed until it frothed around his lips and he came into his own hand as he stroked
himself.

Tony toppled onto Steve, his head pillowed at his waist. “Oh, lord, that was phenomenal. Where’d
you learn to do that trick with your throat?”

Steve smiled. “Just came naturally.”

“God, I hope this isn’t a dream.”

Steve looked to the window, the old lace curtain his mother hung only weeks before her death. “I
wish too.” It was barely audible.

“You wish because you want to go back to the 40s?” Tony said as he peered up at Steve.

Steve pulled him up and cuddled Tony in his arms. “No, actually. Not at all.”

A rumble from Tony’s chest turned Steve toward him just as the dream room from the 1940s
disintegrated around him. It fell away, melting into oblivion as Steve opened his head to the mantra
on his lips. “The Core is the Soul. The Core is in me. I am the Soul.”

A weight against him brought him further back to reality as he looked down to see Tony’s head on
his lap. Steve’s hand was tangled in Tony’s hair. Tony blinked awake as well. He grimaced.

“Steve?”

With a dry throat, Steve said, “Yeah?”

“Wow, that was vivid,” Tony said and sat up only to hold his head. “I feel a little drunk. Did we
drink?”

Steve only shook his head, not sure that Tony saw him.

“I just, damn,” Tony said and bent over. “I have the hardest boner.”

Steve couldn’t do anything but laugh. He barked out and covered his face with his hands. But he
found he was shaking. He had to get to the bottom of this – what the hell had happened. “Tony?”

“God, I think I have to go take care of this,” Tony said as he pressed the heel of his hand into the
crotch of his pants.

“Tony,” Steve said – his tone more like Captain America than he intended. He wasn’t going to
hesitate. He plunged right to the point. “Are you having dreams about me in a 1940s setting?”
Tony froze. His eyes grew large and he stared at Steve. “What?”

“You’re having dreams about a 1940s room with me?”

“Jesus,” Tony said. His jerked a bit as if he hoped it would rouse him. “Hmm, yeah?”

Steve slumped forward, his hands hanging over his knees. “It seems we might be visiting one another in our dreams.”

“And having hot sex while you won’t even consider it in real life. That is fucking rich!” Tony said. He threw himself back onto the couch. “And this is my life.”

“It’s mine, too. And by the way, I wouldn’t mind it so much in real life,” Steve said – his own awareness of stating it out loud seemed distant. He’d finally said it, admitted it to himself at the same time.

Tony glared at him. “Really? You think it’s deviant. We already talked about this.”

“And I’m not so opposed to it. It’s just -.” Saying it was a new discovery for Steve made it sound like he was about fifteen years old, just found out about masturbation, and was confessing it to his buddies. “New.”

Tony studied him for a long moment, his brows curled up, his focus intense. He sidled over to Steve since they had physically separated since they woke up. “It’s new.”

Steve stared at the middle distance, not facing Tony or the truth. “It’s new. I hadn’t really considered it before, but I enjoy it. The dreams. I like it.” He wasn’t sure he could look at Tony as he confessed these truths.

“So, you’ve had these dreams for a while?”

Steve nodded and still kept his eyes straightforward like any good soldier.

“What was the first one you had?”

The flush heated his face. “Before we were technically bonded. In the shower.”

Tony clasped Steve’s hand and that caused Steve to bring his line of sight to him. Tony brought Steve’s hand to his lips. He kissed the knuckles. “Mine, too.” He quirked a brow. “If I don’t count all those adolescent daydream fantasies.”

Steve snickered. “Really?”

“Come on. You never fantasized?”

Steve only lifted a shoulder. “I seem to be making up for lost time.” That sent Tony into hysteric. Steve rolled his eyes. “It’s not funny.” Tony attempted to speak but laughter controlled him. “Not even that funny.” Tony shook his head and wiped away the tears.

“You have been fucking in dreamland and at the same time acting like a prude in reality,” Tony said. “I think I get to laugh a little at that.”

“Coming-.”

“Coming, yep that’s what you’ve done. A lot of it as I recall,” Tony said and slapped his knee. “You wanna kiss?” He made smoochie face at Steve.
Riled up, Steve took the bull by the horns or in lay man’s terms, he went for it. He grabbed Tony’s face and pressed his lips to his mouth. It wasn’t the best kiss. Their teeth clacked and their noses bumped, but after the muffled huh from Tony, he eased right into the kiss and Steve pursued it even further. All these months, years, of denial culminated into this moment. The hunger that grew in Steve from his earliest days overtook him. He hadn’t realized, had been blind to the truth, had fooled himself for too long. The kiss transformed into something wild and passionate. He dragged his hands down Tony’s throat, clawed at his clothes. He would never have come up for air, happy to drown in the ecstasy of the moment. But it was Tony who stopped it, pushed him a way and gulped for air. Once he brought in enough breath, Steve moved again on him, but Tony pressed a hand to his chest and stopped him.

“Whoa there. You’re like a bucking horse. For Crips’ sake, calm down.” Tony looked wrecked, his lips bruised with kisses. Steve knew he must look the same, though probably more ruined and anxious and panting. He didn’t want to lose the excitement – or the courage. “You need to take a moment, Steve. We’re still a little punch drunk from that shared dream. We need to assess.”

“Assess?” Steve said and pawed at Tony. He wanted him, the cords of his soul rang out and jittered with need. “Assess. You, You! Tony Stark wants a moment to assess?”

“Yeah, sounds weird even to me,” Tony said, and he pet Steve’s chest and then his bicep. “You can’t even know how much I want to have a gander at this hunk of man flesh, but no, I think we need to stop and think. I don’t want you walking away in the morning with regret.”

Steve paused. His heart rammed in his chest, his breathing evened out. He smiled. “Okay?”

Tony nodded more to himself than to Steve. “Okay. Then.” He flattened his mouth and said, “I think that may be the first time I said no to someone.”

“How does it feel?”

“Strangely empowering.” Tony stood up, and Steve thought it might be to put distance between them, but instead he reached for the room service menu. “On to dinner?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” But Steve couldn’t get over it – the feeling in his chest. It wasn’t disappointment or resentment. As he looked upon Tony now, the fog cleared away and he saw his life and Tony’s so differently. More than opportunity, his soul clicked into place. It had been untethered and frayed and yet now, now something incredible happened.

Throughout dinner, Steve relished the feeling, soaked in it. He smiled at Tony, enjoyed the moment, and wondered if the feeling expanding over him, through him, might be that he was falling in love.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay. My RBB is finished and posted (phew). And now I am back to my real love - this story. I hope to get the next chapter up by June 17. I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

Chapter 12 - the team becomes a pack!
Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony grow closer. Tony feels like he's finally figured out the pack and what it means to be Beloved. Of course, that only works if there aren't unknowns to be considered....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The progress they made with their relationship (could he call it that?) might very well have been responsible for the fact Tony walked into the Tower on lighter feet. Suddenly the world as a part of a soul pack and as the designated Beloved transformed into something different, something unexplored and exciting. Tony always loved the idea of exploring. In his heart of hearts he named himself an explorer. He explored science and technology. He explored ways towards peace. He explored what the future might bring. The soul pack and his link to Steve offered him a new kind of investigation. He relished it.

Though he couldn’t say whether or not Steve felt the same way. Granted, they spent the day after Peggy’s funeral and burial together. They wandered London streets. Steve told Tony stories of the SSR’s headquarters in London, his brief breaks from the war here, and he pointed out areas of London that had seen devastation from the nightly air raids. All of the destruction had been swept away by recovery and progress. Tony wondered how much of the war had been cleaned away for Steve. Most of it seemed to be only a heartbeat away for him. London seemed to stop time for Steve. Steve made history that seemed prehistoric sometimes when Tony thought of it, come alive. He smiled at Tony, clasped his hand as they made their way through the crowded streets. He even held the door for Tony when they stopped by a small restaurant for quick meal. When they got ready to pack and leave London for New York again, Steve stopped by Tony’s hotel room. Tony invited him in and Steve awkwardly talked to Tony until he just couldn’t handle the pressure anymore and finally kissed him. Tony was a little taken back by Steve’s initiative, but when he broke away from the kiss, he smiled and Tony and murmured he would see him on the plane. He scurried out of the room like a mouse racing away from a cat. And didn’t that image just not fit Captain America at all. Somehow, it amused and tickled Tony that Steve trusted him, wanted it, and took a few uneasy steps toward the new horizon.

On the plane ride back to the States, Steve sat next to Tony and spoke to him in quiet tones. He often bowed his head and didn’t meet Tony’s eyes. “It’s hard for me to do this, Tony.” He clenched and unclenched his hands until he spread them out onto his thighs. Tony had remained silent, allowing the space that Steve needed to gather the courage to speak and explain. “I was taught it was wrong. I understand that it isn’t – wrong that is. But when I- when I want to I feel.” He stopped and flinched. “You feel dirty,” Tony had said. “You wanted the other night.”

“You feel dirty,” Tony had said. “You wanted the other night.”

“I’m glad you stopped me,” Steve said, and he raised his eyes to look at Tony, but then dropped them to stare at his hands again. “Not that I don’t want to. It’s just that I have to take steps. You know? It was great kissing you. Made me feel like it’s the right thing for me. But I need to take those steps. Okay?” He hissed. “I don’t want to lose you or this that we’re building because of my stupid
prejudices."

“Yeah,” he replied. Tony needed to understand, needed to allow Steve the space and time to adjust to his new normal. He couldn’t fixate on the probabilities of what if and how or when in their relationship, he needed to step back and allow it to grow on its own.

That was when Steve reached out and held Tony’s hand, bringing it to his lap. He smiled in what Tony could only describe as incredibly dorky and adorable grin. Throughout the flight, Steve would talk about the team, about Tony’s thoughts about the pack. How to proceed without the support of SHIELD. They fashioned ideas about an Avengers Initiative and how it would run. It was the rare instance that Steve spoke about his feelings. He only mentioned it once, but he did happen to say how much he enjoyed Tony’s company. How he was grateful that Tony was there to support him. None of it was about their bond or their budding romance. Although he tried not to be let down, Tony swallowed his fears and his sense of impending loss. He felt that as soon as they were back in the States, the little dream he had crumbled.

Once they had landed in New York, Steve turned on his efficient, professional persona. He ordered the team back to the Tower, talked with Thor at length, and then followed the path toward the waiting limos. He hadn’t ensured that he took the same limo as Tony, in fact he begged off, saying he needed to spend some time with Thor. Tony hurt because of it, but Tony tried to understand the shock and confusion Thor must be experiencing from being chosen as one of the pack. He’d been there, he’d done that. Seeing Thor and Steve together reminded Tony a lot of how Rhodey and he worked together – brothers in arms. It felt right. He couldn’t begrudge Thor his time with his pack leader and friend.

Back at the Tower, Tony admitted to himself he had hope though, too. Maybe too much hope. Maybe he needed to dial it back. In London, Steve wanted to go all the way, then he boomeranged back to fearing everything about a same sex relationship. Now Steve had settled somewhere in the middle, which was probably for the best. Jumping in with both feet had its benefits but Tony wasn’t sure he could withstand Steve’s resentment, if that grew from too much too soon. Tony needed to work out his own feelings anyhow.

After a night’s rest, Tony buried himself in work, mainly because work helped him to think, to analyze, and to assess. Even if he wasn’t actually figuring out problems directly, work promised answers to him. Half way through his long stretch of time in the laboratory, Bruce walked in and with a cup of tea. He studied Tony for several seconds before sipping his tea and asking, “So, Steve?”

Tony weighed whether or not he should even talk about anything at this stage since his mind incubated the problem and hadn’t come up with a result yet. “Yeah, Steve.”

“It looked like you worked something out, on the flight back that is,” Bruce said, and the jerk had a smile a mile wide that he attempted but failed to hide with the mug. “You spent the day with him.”

“Yeah, we hung out,” Tony agreed but remained mute on the rest of the details. He wasn’t one to kiss and tell. Well, actually he was, but this – with Steve – to Tony felt different, special, and in some freakishly nerdy way – precious. The best part was – Tony didn’t mind, he liked it – a lot. Red alert flags went up. He liked it too much. What if Steve didn’t want it, what if he rejected Tony. Fuck, maybe he needed a drink.

Bruce sighed and put the mug of tea down. “Come on, Clint never says a word about his life. Don’t you start now.”

“What do you want me to say?” Tony said. “London, well, we made a connection. He needed my
help. I did what I could.” He threw down the Kevlar he had been fiddling with for the last hour. “I’m not going to kiss and tell.”

“So, there was kissing?” Bruce raised an eyebrow.

“Lord, what are you a teenager?” Tony grimaced. “It’s a saying. Nothing to it. At all.” Lies, lies, lies. He kissed Steve and Steve kissed him. The first was a messy kiss – the kind where his teeth hit Steve’s – but at the same time it set fire to all his nerves and he thought the hair on the back of his neck stood up. The second had been rushed and bashful, but so sweet like a kiss delivering a promise of something better. All he could think of was getting his hands on Steve again. He wiped at his eyes and shook his head. God, when was the last time he slept? How long had he been down in the workshop since London? He forced himself to concentrate on the here and now. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Bruce ran his hands through his hair and then grumbled, “You gotta give me something. Nat will kill me.”

Smirking, Tony shook his head and rolled his eyes. He saw it now. Living in the Tower with the whole team would be like reliving days in a college dormitory. “You drew the short straw, didn’t you?”

“Something like that,” Bruce said. “Anyway, who knew that the Black Widow loved soap operas, and romance novels? I didn’t. I had no idea. But now that I let that cat out of the bag, she might actually try and kill me. Please, Tony, take pity on me.”

“Well you need to suffer, considering,” Tony said and tried to walk away. But his pride and his excitement just wouldn’t let him leave it like that. Spinning on his heels, he raised his eyebrows and said, “I didn’t tell you but a certain Captain of all that is Spangley thinks he might be attracted to the same sex.”

Of course, Bruce scrunched up his face. “How’s Steve handling it?”

“Handling being attracted to moi?” When Bruce screwed up his mouth and glared at Tony, he dropped the act. “Okay, okay. Not well at first but he’s coming around to it. He tried to make a huge leap but, believe it or not, I stopped him. I was actually quite proud of me, myself and I for cockblocking myself.”

“Oh.” Bruce scratched at his day-old beard. “Do you think he needs to talk to someone?”

“He talked to Sam I’m pretty sure, and he’ll probably end up talking to Nat,” Tony said and then for only a few moments he let the strings of their souls go from the din in the background to the fore. He heard Steve’s brass along with Sam’s strings concert together. “Right now still talking to Sam. Again.” Should he be worried about Sam? Was Sam gay? Had Tony ever seen Sam with someone? Of course, they hadn’t been around one another long enough to know, but shit, he didn’t know. Maybe Sam was making a move on Steve. Shit, shit, shit.

“Good, good,” Bruce said. He pointed at Tony. “How about you?”

“What about me?” Tony wanted to ignore the question and ask Bruce about Sam, but he tried to cool his jets, forced the panic down.

“You need to talk?”

“I’m a big boy, I know the ways and means of being gay, Bruce,” Tony said. And jealousy apparently too.
“Yeah, but do you know about being in a relationship as the Beloved?” Bruce followed Tony as he tried to get away. He’d really considered the implications of being Beloved and how the soul worked, but maybe not as in depth as he needed. In his chest, a second heart throbbed a beat. If he stopped and listened, Steve’s presence, his soul threads would tangle around Tony. At first, they had been discordant, but now that dissonance rectified and hummed into a possibility, a melody. He shouldn’t even worry about Sam – it was fucking crystal clear how Steve had through the soul bond partnered with Tony in all but in deed.

Tony stopped at the door to the laboratory, his hand on the door. “I’m getting an idea.”

Bruce asked again, “You need to talk about it?”

“I might,” Tony admitted. He peered over his shoulder at Bruce. “But I need to talk to someone-.”

He hated this part because now the music in his head swelled and he cringed against it. “I need to talk to Nat or Sam. I’m sorry Bruce, it’s just-.”

“That’s their role,” Bruce said and put his hands in his back pockets. “It’s okay. I’m here to mend broken souls not give advice. I’m not that kind of doctor.”

“No, no you’re not, but neither are they,” he said and swallowed down the feeling of betrayal. “I’m sorry.” He need to invoke secrecy – he needed a confidant. He needed Nat.

“No need,” Bruce replied. “Just go.”

Tony left Bruce in his laboratory. Guilt like a rotten tomato soured his tongue. He would have talked to Bruce, but it would have just been that – talking, not threading the needle and sewing the complicated knots of their souls. He needed it to be soul deep. As he walked over to the elevator, rode it, and then started down the hallway to search for Natasha in the common areas of the Tower’s residence for the Avengers, he couldn’t help but allow the soul bond energy to wash over him. He marveled at it, much like he marveled at his father’s message to him through a model of a city. The soul bonds entwining and supporting him now were second nature. The idea of Steve at the center, the nucleus slotted into place like he belonged there. Yet, maybe it wasn’t just Steve at the center and, as Tony rounded the corner to the living room, the flash hit him. Steve was the nucleus but only part of it. He might be the leader, the nucleus, but Tony – Tony was the electron in the s shell – closest to the center. Charged and ready to go.

Natasha turned around and eyed him when he walked into the living space. She was having a pajama day as she liked to call it. Wearing thick fleece pajama bottoms with Star Wars characters patterned all over them and an oversized sweat shirt, she had a bowl of strawberries on her lap and she smiled at him as he plopped down on the opposite side of the couch.

“Want one?” She offered him the bowl.

He begged off. “I have bad memories about strawberries.”

Natasha shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She continued to munch. Her legs were bent and her feet bare on the couch.

“I wanted to ask you something. Since you’re the Confidant of the group.”

She twisted around and placed the bowl behind on the table behind her. “I’m not betraying his confidence in me. He’s one of the few people that ever trusted me.”

“I get that,” Tony said. “I’m asking you to be my Confidant. To help me.” She nodded, her expression serious. He cleared his throat. “What I want to know is, is he okay?” And Tony finally
exhaled. It felt like he’d been holding his breath since that night of their shared dream.

Natasha sat up straight, her eyes deep and wide. “I get a peaceful feeling from Steve. As if a burden is lifting from him for the first time.”

Why didn’t he read that? Their roles must dictate how they perceived the pack and the soul bonds. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, the soul pack has been difficult for him. It’s been growing in leaps and bounds, but now, now he’s accepting each and every one of us. Having Peggy replaced so quickly with Thor, hurt him, but you changed that.”

“Changed it?”

“Yeah, you supported him, you gave him only what I can call succor.” Natasha stretched out her legs so that her bare feet were touching him. “A burden was lifted. I’m pretty sure you had a role in that. You need to make sure whatever you did, however you did that, he doesn’t build it up again. Otherwise this whole soul pack thing is never going to work right.”

“I can support him and say it until I’m blue in the face, but he has to be willing to -.” Tony stopped. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for from Steve. He recalled those erotic dreams, the shared one in London. Yet, he wanted something more.

“You were the one who figured out how to weave all the soul energies together. You bonded us all during the funeral. That means you are his strength, his glue,” Natasha said.

“How’d you get so knowledgeable about soul mates and packs?” He appreciated her frank words, but he still felt adrift. He treaded water while she swam Olympic laps around him.

“Let’s just say I have experience,” Natasha said, and she left it at that.

“You were in a pack before?” Tony narrowed his eyes as if he could read the truth of it on the fine lines of her face.

“A bond not a pack. That’s what I recall,” Natasha said with a small lift of her shoulder. “It’s weird because now I know it was a change in the timeline, a change in our reality because of Strange. It might never have been, but it is now – to me.”

“Yeah that paradoxical time stuff can be a little nauseating,” Tony said. “Where is your soul mate now?”

She rubbed at her wrist where the scar from her bonding with Steve was. “It’s not important,” Natasha answered but bowed her head and didn’t look up at him. A tremulous memory hinted at the surface but she washed it away. “What’s important now is our pack, this one. Not the past.”

He had no clue how to answer that and only lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, so am I. But things are better now,” Natasha said and when he peered at her he saw her bobbing her head as if to convince herself.

“Things are. We’re a pack. A soul pack,” Tony emphasized it. “Being part of a pack that’s the Avengers has to count for something.”

“I hope it does. It’s a lot like losing family when you lose a soul bond,” she returned. “So, now I have to ask – what are you going to do?”
Tony opened his hands and the emptiness ate at him, made him exposed and vulnerable. “I have to follow his lead. He is the leader. If he invites me to be more than a friend, I’ll do it. Happily.”

“You’re interested?” Natasha said. Her eyes were motes of contemplation.

Tony turned his focus to the large picturesque windows where he could see the city and how it seemed to go on forever. “Yeah. I hoped it was just that stupid boyhood crush, but it isn’t. There’s a genuineness about Steve that it’s hard to find these days. We might not have shared life experiences, but we do- we do. In some convoluted way we do.”

“You’d like him to be true to the most intimate definition of Beloved,” Natasha whispered, and he could detect no malice, no sarcasm. She tread lightly, like a ballerina.

“Yeah,” Tony said. He swallowed down the callus remarks. “I think so.”

“So, what do you do now?” Natasha asked.

“Like I said, I have to wait for his move.” Tony slumped into the couch. “I kind of feel paralyzed. I’ve never felt like this before, not when it comes to getting the guy – or the girl. Always went for it. Now I’m scared shitless that he’s gonna run, that he’s gonna be terrified if I make a move. With the complication of the pack – it’s just too much.”

Natasha reached for the bowl of berries again. “Everyone makes the same mistake about Steve, they think that Captain America and Steve Rogers are the same person. Steve Rogers is the ninety pound weakling. He’s the one who couldn’t get a date to save his life.”

“Well, it’s hard to separate the two-.”

“You gonna need to,” Natasha said. “If you have any hope of moving forward.”

Talking with Natasha brought Tony full circle. How productive it ended up being, Tony couldn’t assess. Over the next few days, Tony decided to dedicate himself to remaining scarce, or showing a low profile around the Tower. He made it his business to show up in the kitchen or the living room around lunch time to see if Steve would be lurking. While each of the team had their own floors of the Tower, JARVIS had informed Tony that they liked to spend time with one another during the day or even late into the night. With that in mind, Tony hung out but tried to stay in the back ground as he assessed the team as well as Steve. What he concluded gave him hope. Steve liked to lunch with some of the pack. He would start cooking up something in the early afternoon. Like a short order cook, he would take orders and place plates of grill cheese, bowls of homemade soup, or even the occasional bowl of chili or hamburger in front of his eager customers. Natasha always showed up as did Thor. The latter still seemed shell shocked with the soul link and Bruce spent a lot of time with him.

Shell shocked? Lord he was starting to sound like some old guy that had infected his brain.

Tony wanted to remain inconspicuous, but still when he did show up Steve smiled at him. He tried to pretend it was only for him, but in the back of his mind he knew that he was fooling himself. Steve was nice to everyone. Tony tested it, he touched Steve’s hand when he was served, and Steve didn’t shake him off. When Steve sat next to him, Tony made sure to edge his leg next to Steve’s. Steve hadn’t moved away, but instead a blush on his cheeks appeared that reminded Tony of being sun kissed.

Half of Tony wanted the dream space to absorb him during the night again, but it hadn’t appeared at all. Tony figured that it probably wouldn’t. He couldn’t will it and, he assumed, because they
understood it as a real space between them they’d destroyed it somehow. Steve hadn’t pursued more of an intimate relationship since that first moment they realized that the dream space was real to some extent. Yet, he seemed more open to Tony and definitely didn’t snap Tony’s wrist when he happened to touch Steve. During one of the lunches as the whole pack chowed down on grilled cheese sandwiches (which Tony used to hate but somehow Steve managed to change that opinion with his secret recipe), Steve mentioned it would be nice for the pack to start training.

“We train every day, Cap,” Clint said as he finished off his second sandwich. He’d re-appeared at the Tower about a week ago. He came and went a lot. No one, except maybe Natasha, knew where he went. SHIELD was gone, but he seemed to have something that took him away from the pack.

“I’m not talking about physical training,” Steve said. He looked at Tony and then scanned the rest of the team. “We’re a soul pack and we need to start acting like it. Tony has been able to manipulate the astral energies and I think we could do more of it. If we practice.”

“Practice?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, all of us. We should give it a try,” Steve said. “I talked with Wong and he thinks it would be best if we started with some of our physical training exercises because we know how to do that and then we could add the soul pack dimensions to it.”

“You want to do this in the gym?” Natasha asked. The doubtful look radiated not only a dismissive attitude but also some distrust. The latter was normal for her, but the former – not so much when it came to Steve.

“Well, where else?”

“I think we need to do it outside. Some space would help,” Clint said. “And I think I might have the best place.”

“Yeah?”

Clint winked at Natasha and she only smirked while he answered, “Yeah.”

“Okay, let’s get it organized then,” Steve said, and Tony knocked Steve’s leg with his knee. Steve only smiled at Tony.

Later, Clint, Steve, and Tony managed to put together a traveling plan after everyone else had cleared out of the common kitchen. Clint told them of a private farm they could use as a good training area. Clint rolled out a map of the residence and showed them an area of fallow ground.

“This area here near the woods and the stream is open and not being farmed at the moment. It’s far enough away from the pasture land that the war games won’t really interfere or cause trouble with the grazing animals.”

Tony frowned. “Who owns the place?”

Clint sniffed and crossed his arms over his chest. “I do.” He raised his shoulders. “I have a farm. I think about the future. I can’t do this forever, you know.”

Tony squirmed inside because he’d tried to retire several times. Being Iron Man had become part of his definition. It was in his blood. Was it an infection or was it written in his DNA? The idea of leaving it behind – that was an entirely different road in life. When he glanced at Steve, a conflict of emotions warred across his features. The same feelings ached in Tony. Envy was an ugly thing, but when it mixed with relief it turned into something sickening.
Steve tapped the map. “Well, can we go there in the next few days?”

Clint tightened his mouth and nodded. “Give me a day or so, I can arrange it.”

Steve released a breath. “Good, then we go.”

Something vibrated through the bond and Tony immediately recognized that it was nervousness and that it came from Clint. It wired him with tension. Tony frowned. They were missing something about this farm. “You sure you want to do this?”

Steve studied Tony as he queried Clint. Without pause, Hawkeye said, “Yeah, I think it’s time.” He gave Steve a half assed salute and then walked out of the kitchen.

“What was that all about?” Steve asked as he shuffled the map Clint had laid out on the kitchen table. The dirty dishes were stacked on the counter next to the sink.

“He’s nervous about it. Like he’s hiding something,” Tony said. Clint’s astral projection always felt blurry to Tony as if he looked at it through thick fog. “Amazing, he can hide it so well.”

“Even in a pack,” Steve said. He furrowed his brows. “How’d you read that?”

Tony shrugged as he went to put the dishes in the sink. “Like I said, it’s math to me. I just kind of follow it to its natural conclusion.”

“I think Wong would say you’re a natural at it.” Steve said as he sidled up to Tony’s side. Standing at the sink together as Steve started to scrape the dishes, the warmth of the moment washed over Tony. Steve continued as he rinsed the dishes, seemingly not minding the closeness, the intimacy of the moment. “You’ll have to train us. I can do the physical, but you seem to have a handle on the metaphysical.”

Tony watched Steve’s strong hands working. Even the menial task of cleaning the dishes took on a whole new meaning. “You do know I hate magic, right?”

Without even pausing, Steve said, “Well you seemed to like it well enough in good old dream land.”

Now Tony blushed. “Wow, Captain America and his dirty mouth.”

“You seemed to like that, too,” Steve said but kept his focus on the task at hand as he opened the dishwasher and started to stack the dishes.

Handling hot lava might have been easier than broaching taboo subjects with Steve. “You feel better now about it? I was worried. That night was charged, you know. And I thought you might back track.”

Steve wiped his hands and leaned against the counter, fully facing Tony. “I might have. Still could. It’s hard. It’s not -.” Steve screwed up his features and then flared his nostrils and he breathed out again. “I was going to say not natural, but that’s the wrong word. It’s just not easy to drop decades of understanding for a new one.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” Tony said. He took the nozzle of the faucet and washed out the sink. “I stopped making weapons of war. That was a hard thing to do. I hadn’t ever thought about what it would mean. Never. I just did.”

“And then you closed up shop.”
“Yeah, a new light,” Tony said as he finished cleaning the sink. He turned off the water. “You could say it that way. A new light shone, and I suddenly got it.”

Steve hung up the towel and closed the dishwasher. “I’d been fooling myself for years. When I was a kid I’d get in fights all the time. Some of them were for important things, other times it was because the kids would call me names. Top amongst them was fairy.” He put up his hands to stop Tony’s protest. “Nat already told me that’s not a nice word. I didn’t really need to know that little factoid. I knew it instinctively back then. Many bloody noses would attest to that fact. I was called it on more than one occasion. Once I got old enough I understood it. And the pain was immeasurable. The shame.” He rubbed at his eye as hiding unshed tears, and then raked his fingers through his hair. “The embarrassment when I came home from another fight and my Ma would ask me what happened. How could I tell her? What the other boys said? So, I railed against it. And it became ingrained. Something like that kind of self-preservation is hard to suddenly let go of.”

“I get that. I do. But you seem more comfortable with it.” Tony’s hip hit Steve’s and they stood like that hip to hip. The dream and its after effects still resonated.

“I am. Maybe it’s the soul thing, or those dreams.” Steve’s soul sounded a beat, strong and steady, so different than his quiet tentative voice.

Tony had to confess how he felt. By telling the truth, laying it bare than Steve would have to face it as well. “I really enjoyed those dreams.”

“So did I,” Steve said. He hadn’t even hesitated when he stated it. “I liked what we’ve done so far, too.” He tucked that on as if to reassure Tony. A kiss – that’s all they shared. Two kisses. But to Steve it meant something so Tony needed to be satisfied. A silence dropped over them, as they stood standing side to side, hip to hip in the common kitchen. Tony discovered a kind of ache emanating from Steve. Fear tangled up with yearning.

“You’re still afraid,” Tony said in a low voice.


Tony offered his hand. “Come on.” Steve took his hand and Tony dragged him away from the kitchen. Truth be told, Tony didn’t have a clue what he should do. Instead, he let the feeling of his soul’s energy lead him as if he had jumped into a car and just let the road take him where it would. Eventually they ended up at his workshop. Steve hesitated at the entrance, but Tony hauled him inside the main lab.

“I thought you might like to see this,” Tony said. He hadn’t really worked on it, not much at least. It had only been a few little notes and maybe some code. “Something I started working on when we came back from London. Like I said, I see it as a mathematical equation.” Tony keyed in the program he’d been working on and asked, “J-man give me the whole shebang.” He flung his arms out because he was always dramatic.

Before him a universe of stars linking up like neural networks appeared. It sparkled over them, a canopy of lights. Steve leaned back, gazing at the holographic lights. His lips parted slightly as he whispered wow. “What’s that?” He pointed to a conglomerate of stars.

“Each group of stars is one of the souls in our pack,” Tony said. He reached up and turned the projection. “This is you, in the middle. You’re the core of it. Everything revolves around you.”

“That’s intimidating.”
“Not as intimidating as the shell around you,” Tony said as he tapped the halo around the cluster of stars in the center. “From how it works and how I felt it in London – this is me. I’m the armor around you.”

“How? How do you know it works like that?” Steve asked as he spun on his heel under the hologram.

“I could say it’s easy, but it isn’t.” Tony spread his arms wide and the display disappeared to be replaced by a litany of equations. Numbers and operations fell around them. “It’s not easy. But what I did was sit and feel it. Sounds a little hippie but it’s true. I told you I was able to manipulate the soul energies by following the resolution to an equation. So, let’s look at an easy one.” He pulled an example of one of his equations. “Each soul has numerous unknowns. But you have to assume some of the unknowns are the same between people. So, we remove those.” He wiped some of the unknowns away. “Then I wrote out some equations to represent specific characteristics. Confidentiality, companionship, mentorship. All of that for example. Each identity has each of these some more than others. If you knew anything about role playing games, you could call these character traits or something like that.”

“Role playing?”

“Forget it,” Tony said. He clapped his hands and tossed the equations out. “Bring it all back.” JARVIS displayed the universe of stars again. “This is a construct of how I understand it.”

“It’s magnificent. It’s like seeing inside your brain,” Steve said as he leaned back to look at the fall of stars around him.

Tony smiled. It reminded him of electron orbitals around a nucleus – different orbitals from the s to p to d had different shapes, different attractions. “Do you want to know which cluster is which?”

“Yeah, yeah!” Steve nodded his head and smiled back at Tony.

“Okay, so I built it with you as the core. It made sense that way. Resolving each equation to you as the solution. It actually ends up making sense because character traits cancel out or become additive to create the center or you.” Tony smiled and popped on the balls of his feet and then back down. “I’m the shell around you. It worked out that way. I didn’t manipulate the data if you think that. Each cluster around us-.”

“Looks like an atom or something.” Steve muttered.

“Someone’s done his homework,” Tony said. That just made him want to cheer inside. His mind race forward as he explained the theory of electron orbits. “It’s like an atom but different. Electron shells are in orbits with different shapes. The s orbit is like me, but then the p and d orbitals get weirder as we go out. So, the closest ones are here and here.” He pulled the display around and pointed it out. “Of no surprise to anyone, Sam’s here, closest to the inner orbit while Natasha and Clint hover a bit more distant but close. Over here is Thor and Bruce for some reason. I would have thought Bruce would be closer considering he was the first bond. But it didn’t work out that way and I’m not one to manipulate data.”

Steve walked out from the center and pointed to outlying clusters. “What’s this?”

Tony raised a shoulder in a shrug. “That’s your buddy, Barnes, and that other cluster far off is the Maximoff twins. They are really unknowns and only connected to the rest of the group by the common parameter of you.”
“This is amazing.”

“It works, but it needs a lot more refinement,” Tony said as he studied his creation. “Like this with Clint. I keep getting this fuzzy cloud around him. And Natasha seems to have an outlying connection to something – I’m not sure what.” It occurred to him then that it was probably the other soul bond she talked about to him. Whatever happened to that bond and why it was in the state it was now, remained a mystery.

“What’s up with the fuzziness?” Steve stepped next to Tony as they focused on Clint’s cluster.

“Parameters show Cint’s cagey about details. He disappears, he doesn’t always answer direct questions. So the equations can’t be fully resolved. More so than even Nat. She seems to know something about it and I can’t figure it out.”

“You’re more of an observer of people than I gave you credit for,” Steve said and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked satisfied, happy even.

“It’s rough. I am basing a lot of this on assumptions. It needs a lot of refinement like I said. Not much in the literature quantifying soul mates or packs. I really did have to start from scratch in some ways. But I’ll get it there. It will help once I can clean it up.” He needed to know a lot more about the pack, understand the character traits, and be able to quantify them better. Maybe Bruce could help.

Steve placed his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Don’t do that. Don’t tear it down. It’s wonderful and it’s helping me understand even more how this whole soul pack works.”

“And how I’m orbiting close?” Tony said and swallowed down the surprising fear that caged him, made him feel like a prisoner in his own skin.

Steve turned to Tony and slipped his hand up against his neck. Tony wanted to lean into it but stopped himself. “It means that we’re closer together, more the same.”

“In some ways, but in other ways I think we’re different.”

“Well the leaders of the pack, of the Avengers can’t be completely the same. How would that help us?” Steve said but his words were tender, even soft. He watched as Steve’s eyes flicked to Tony’s lips and then back again to his eyes. “I’ve been wrong, almost misled in my days.”

As the stars of their pack cascaded down around them in bright blues and crystal white, Tony searched for an answer in Steve’s expression. “Misled?”

“For so long, I ignored the feelings inside. I pretended. But now I feel like I’m waking up from the ice all over again. Like for the first time I can see and feel what it’s like-.” He stopped, and Tony felt the tremor through him. “I’ve always been so sure of everything. Now I’m not. Now I see where I’ve been blind. A leader cannot lead unless they see. I see now.”

The shudder through Steve could have halted Tony’s motion, but instead it only urged him on, to touch, to kiss. He pulled Steve into an embrace and guided him down to his lips. Steve resisted at first, but then relaxed. The kiss transformed the awkward, hesitant kisses from before – this kiss devoured and hungered. Tony thought to freeze, to let Steve decided how far, how deep to take the kiss, but the little moans and then raking of Steve’s hands down Tony’s back pushed him farther toward active pursuit. Tony pressed, and Steve’s mouth opened to accept him. The taste of Steve, the touch of his mouth, the weight of his body against Tony’s sent ripples of excitement through him. They melted against one another, Tony thrilled to it and let his body lead while he stretched back and found the threads of their souls harmonizing together. As if it was second nature, he wove them
together and in response, Steve moaned and shivered against Tony. They stumbled, and Tony moved backwards toward the ratty couch in the workshop. Steve didn’t stop.

For a second Tony worried that weaving their souls’ energies together might be a little too manipulative. When he plopped down on the couch and Steve went to follow him, Tony put a hand on his chest and said, “Are you sure? It’s not just the soul thing.”

Steve flushed and bowed his head. Tony bit at his own lip; this was it – Steve was going to tuck tail and run. “It’s a little of the soul thing, but it’s a lot more of -.” He grabbed Tony’s hand, rubbing it but not looking at him. “It’s, well, it’s a lot more.”.

“Yeah?” Tony said and couldn’t stop the smile on his face. Being in his forties he shouldn’t feel like a teenager anymore, but damned if his heart didn’t ram a thrilling beat in his chest. “A lot more?”

Tony had to quell his reactions a little. He sensed the timid, almost frightened after image of Steve’s astral energies. He couldn’t jump in like he was partying in Monaco. Right here, right now, before him Steve invited and the risk of scaring him away loomed.

“I’m not frightened,” Steve said. Tony tried not to frown at that obvious lie. Steve must have read his doubt. He squeezed Tony’s hand. “Okay, maybe I am. But not in the way you think. I’m not frightened of who I am. I’m not frightened of being myself, anymore.” Steve chanced to look at Tony. His eyes glistened with excitement, at the challenge. Though Tony also caught a slight sliver of fear.

“You were – you are,” Tony said as he stared up at Steve, standing over him. The glitter of the soul network haloed around Steve, giving him an almost ethereal glow.

“Sometimes you have to jump right in or else you’ll never move,” Steve said, and he dropped to his knees in front of Tony. Steve leaned into him as Tony rested back on the couch. Tony cupped Steve’s face in his hands.

“You don’t have to jump too far,” Tony said, and he thought his hands carried the stars as the projection seemed to merge with them.

“But I want to jump, Tony,” Steve said, and his words were practically whined. His hands trembled at he held onto Tony. Making such a leap might be easy in words but not in deeds.

“Oh sweetheart,” Tony said and noticed how Steve beamed at the endearment. “I just want you to be comfortable. We take it as slow as you want, as slow as you need.”

Steve shook his head, and gripped Tony’s hands, hard enough that it nearly hurt. “I don’t want to be slow. I just don’t know. I don’t know what to do. I feel like a fool.” Steve shuttled closer. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m an idiot.”

“JARVIS, locked the doors and dim the lights, but keep the hologram.” Tony guided Steve up onto the couch. He pulled Steve into an embrace and held him for long minutes, stroking a hand up and down his back, then he said, “This isn’t about pressure, Steve. You need to feel comfortable.”

The lights went down and the click of the doors locking echoed in the workshop. The sparkling of the starry projection shined like a thousand blue and white candles over them. Tony spotted the glints of the lights reflected in Steve’s eyes. Even as he noted it, Steve said, “The whole universe.”

Distracted. The starry projections of their astral bondings distracted Steve from the pressure. Tony thought, for a moment, that Steve might use it to avoid intimacy, but he was wrong. Steve slipped his hand to cradle Tony’s head and fitted their mouths together as if they were made for each other, as if
the universe’s machinations finally slotted together. It felt too right to deny any longer and Tony devoured the taste and feel of Steve. He wanted more and Steve welcomed him. Even as they clung to one another, Steve quaked under Tony’s hands.

Tony separated from Steve, searching his eyes, his expression to try and check in with him. “Are you-?”

Steve chewed on his lower lip. His hand still touched Tony’s cheek and jaw. His hands were so big, and strong. “I’m fine. Don’t stop. Don’t stop now.” He leaned into Tony, holding him, bringing his forehead to touch Tony’s. “I just don’t want to be a disappointment to you. You mean too much to me.”

Those last words, so perfect, so heartfelt, sent Tony soaring. He wanted to scream out and dance and announce it to the world, but he suppressed his very normal reaction and clenched his hands onto Steve’s shoulders. “You could never disappointment me. Never.”

Steve smiled – and it was shy and – Tony had to admit – pretty. Tentatively, Steve pressed closer, nuzzling against Tony’s neck. His actions were sweet, and decidedly not sexy.

“Come here, let me take off your shirt.” Tony guided Steve to sit more properly on the couch and then tugged off his shirt. He examined Steve’s chest, the soul mark across it – the Beloved brand – purpled against his skin. Reaching out, Tony touched it. “Is it always this color?”

Steve looked down at his chest and his shoulders slumped inward, his back curled forward as if to hide the markings. “No.”

Tony tilted his head and cracked a smile, trying to ease Steve’s embarrassment. “Well, you know, let’s take a look at mine.” Tony yanked off his shirt and tossed it aside. His markings, radiating out from the scar where his arc reactor used to sit, warmed as well, and colored to a reddish purple. “Seems we kind of match.”

Steve stretched out his hand, but didn’t touch. Tony took it, clasped it, and then brought it to his chest. Steve ran his hands along the lines on Tony’s chest, down his torso. Each finger sent lines of fire through him, the bond marks glowed in response. “I didn’t know it would do this.”

“Me neither.” In their dreams he never saw it, but then again – those were dreams. Or so Tony convinced himself. Steve kept tracing the lines as if he painted them on himself. Each touch shivered through Tony and spikes of pleasure intensified until he couldn’t help but moan a little.

“Tony?”

He had his eyes slightly lidded and his head thrown back. “It’s okay. Keeping doing it. I like it. It’s good, so good.”

“Just touching you? Like this?” Steve whispered and stroked his hand down the sun burst around Tony’s arc reactor scar.

Fire ran through Tony right to his groin. “Christ, that’s hot.”

Steve jerked his hand away. “What?”

“No, no.” Tony grabbed his hand and placed it right on his nipple. “It’s hot as in sexy hot. Jesus you feel so good.”

“Really? Just this?” Steve said and ran his thumb over Tony’s nipple.
“Oh you have no idea,” Tony muttered. “I cannot believe it. It’s fucking fantastic. You gotta understand Steve – this is like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

Steve tightened his lips as he tried to suppress a smile. “You like it?”

“Yeah,” Tony said and invited himself to touch Steve. Just thinking that the act of touch, the simple act of brushing his hand down Steve’s chest to the small of his waist could be so beautiful, send such thrilling sensations through him awed Tony. He wanted to leap on Steve, to kiss him everywhere, but he held back and let Steve guide them.

“I want, I want to hold you?” Steve said and sidled closer but didn’t dare to embrace Tony.

The glittering lights around them enhanced the want and desire in Steve’s eyes. “Please do.”

Tony quaked as if this moment might be the first time he’d ever done this and then he realized the feeling echoed from Steve. Pausing in their explorations, Tony held Steve close and whispered, “I’m here; it’s okay.”

A shiver answered him and then Steve shifted, and Tony felt the hardness of his cock against his inner leg. Steve brought Tony closer and their chests touched, but all Tony could think of was Steve and how he responded, how he was turned on by Tony. It might be ridiculously foolish but it made him so fucking happy. “I want, I want to feel you Tony.”

The rosy color on Steve’s face spread to his chest. In the dim light his eyes were already dilated, but now his eyes turned black with desire. He nodded as his lips parted and his tongue flicked out. The next minutes Tony described as floating. All his wishes and hopes materialized and his body became transformed and threaded into his soul – or so that was how it felt with Steve kissing him on the neck, on the shoulder, on his chest and along the lines of the soul brand as if it gave him succor. Steve seemed to lose himself in the act of kissing and touching. And Tony laid back onto the couch and closed his eyes, because Steve was magic, and their souls vibrated and expanded, and it was all too much.

Steve made love to Tony with his mouth without even once touching his dick which was still straining in his pants. It set Tony’s nerves singing and he had a hard time concentrating on reciprocity.

“God, Steve,” Tony murmured and shifted to give Steve better access to his neck and chest. “I want to- I want to touch you too.” He wanted Steve’s pants off. But suddenly the idea of asking got all tangled up with fears and isolation and – holy shit that was Steve’s thoughts and worries. “Steve.” Tony stopped him, bracing his hands against his arms. “I want more of you. Can we? Can we take off our pants?” Tony felt the blush of embarrassment from Steve just as surely as if he’d been the bashful one.

“Oh,” Steve said and looked down at himself. He smiled. “Yeah, yeah!” He sat up and started to unzip.

Tony followed suit and threw his pants to the side, only to feel a rush of adrenalin as if he wanted to flee. He offered steadying waves to Steve and the rapidity of his breathing evened out. Tony grabbed his hand. “Are you sure about this?” He tried not to look at the prominent erection Steve sported.

“I could lead the way a little?” Tony asked, and he had no problem doing that at all.

Steve crunched up his face as if Tony might be preparing to stab him. “Okay.”

Tony sighed. “Steve, open your eyes. I swear this isn’t going to hurt. What would you like me to do?” He waited as Steve looked at him and panted a little. “I want you, but I don’t know. I don’t know what men actually do!” He grunted a little. “I know, but I don’t know how to do it. Gah, I sound like an idiot.”

Tony tried not to laugh, and he mostly managed to hold it back. When he did let a little out Steve nearly growled at him. He held up his hands and said, “You’re just so damned cute. Don’t blame me. Can I give you a little show?”

Furrowing his brows, Steve asked in a dubious voice, “A show?”

Tony winked at him and then went down. He gave some of the best fellatio, and he opened his soul to Steve, exposed, bare, and yearning as he deep threated Steve. Steve gasped a moan out and Tony groaned around his erection. It took no time at all for Steve to find his natural state, put his hands onto Tony’s head, and hold him in place as he petted his hair. He made little noises that went right to Tony’s groin and if Steve didn’t stop sometime soon, Tony might go off right now.

As Steve started to rock into his mouth, Tony ran his tongue along the underside of his thick cock. Pre-come ran freely from his cock and Tony lapped at it, sucking and licking as he did. Steve growled out a half scream, half cry. Tony looked up to catch a glimpse of Steve, rolling his head against the back of the couch, hands now gripping the threadbare fabric and tearing it. His mouth was open as he cried out and it jolted Tony. He needed to stop or else he was going to come without a hand on him. Just seeing Steve so overcome and feeling the reflection of it along the lines of their souls as they wrapped together took his breath away. Yet he transcended the physical plane of feeling, of experiencing the moment. He tried to clasp onto the feelings, the coiling in his groin as he closed in on climax but he failed to stay. The energies surrounding them permeated his consciousness until it lifted him and it transformed him. Souls merged and he only succumbed to its power, its potency.

In that moment, he saw all the things he knew he could not do become possible. The soul bond pulsed before him, alive and healthy and a living thing. More than just a hope or wish, it tethered him to Steve – more than an anchor and more like a link to life itself. As it flourished between them his heightened sense of self, of the bond Tony opened his eyes to see the gleaming display of stars projected around them, but it paled in comparison to the living bond.

Tony released Steve’s cock and a whimper of complaint was his answer. “Hey, come on, look at me.” Steve blinked a few times and then focused on Tony as he climbed back onto the couch. “I want to come with you.”

The ample amount of pre-come dripping down Steve’s cock served as a lubricate and Tony gripped both of their cocks together in his hand. Steve shuddered as their cocks touched and he turned his head, closed his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Tony quietly urged. “Watch.” He reached over with his other hand, and turned Steve’s head back to facing him. The command was more of a request, but Steve still followed it. He arched his back as he watched Tony stroke up and down. His breathes quaked. “Help me.”

Steve reached out, slowly, hesitantly. He clasped his hand around Tony’s.

“Together,” Tony whispered. His heart wanted to explode out of his chest. He panted and cried out
as Steve’s cock literally throbbed against his own.

Steve had shifted, fallen to his knees in front of Tony. He groaned, and it sent shivered through Tony, like electrical kisses to his nerve endings. It grew in intensity and he attempted to halt it, to stop the greedy need. Tony surrendered to the bond, to the pulsating of hunger within it, and he gripped their cocks, as smears of pre-come dripped down his hand. His body and soul combined into one famished insistent energy and he lost control of it. Together they worked. Tony noted the pulse of life between them, the soul bond seemed to glow and shine around them. Tony followed it, enhancing the thrill of the moment but also tightening and strengthening the bond between them. Tony gasped at the reality of the bond, as it wove around and through them. The markings along Steve’s chest and Tony’s reflected one another, images that mirrored one another and these markings burned brightly. They become less the physical beings and more the ethereal as Tony threaded the bonds together. Steve stretched out with his free hand and brought Tony to him, holding him to his shoulder as they pumped their cock together. He wept as Tony wrapped one hand around him, felt the heat of the moment as well as their souls’ etching on their chests burst with warmth and connection. It only expanded as Steve came in a great flood over their hands. He yelled out and Tony swore to heaven and back again that he felt the shock wave, that his own soul vibrated with the ecstasy and the joy, and the yearning all at once. The room around him with its bright blue stars and darker shadows of reality whited out and Tony threw his head back as he yelled out his completion. He shuddered and then Steve collapsed into him.

Tony pulled him close and held him as the after effects of his climax quaked through him. They sat on the floor, the abandoned couch behind them. Steve held Tony, his strong arms around him. He panted and trembled against Tony.

“Hey, hey, you okay?” Tony peeled himself off Steve to look at him and saw tears staining his face.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve said. His hand quaked as his wiped away the tears. “Sorry, I just. I never knew. I’m sorry. I told you so many times it was wrong.” The tears streaked down his face and didn’t stop.

Tony cradled Steve against his chest. What could he say? He had resented Steve for saying the things he had – deviant, wrong. But then again, had he even considered Steve’s upbringing? Had he even considered that the world that Steve understood and the environment he’d grown up in had been less evolved – if that was the way to put it. “It’s okay.” Was it? Tony thought it was. Normally Tony would tease and extract some amount of apology – more than what Steve had offered. But the fact was that he didn’t want that – he wanted what they had in this moment. He wanted it forever. “It’s okay. You get a pass. You get a do over.” Making the moment light might not be the best avenue to take but the intensity might drive Tony into an early grave from a heart attack.

Steve tensed and then he laughed. “A do over?”

“Sure? Why not?” Tony said and grinned as Steve shook his head.

Steve was silent for a long time before he said, “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.” Though Tony felt as if it might crack everything they’d just built.

“I didn’t expect this. I didn’t know I could do this,” Steve said. “I wasn’t planning on it. Not today. I thought maybe sometime in the distant future. I thought it was wrong for so long.”

Tony knew that, but he held his breath and then asked, “And now?”

Steve cleared his throat and Tony held his breath. “I have to admit, I feel a little wrong. Guilty. Don’t, don’t say anything. It’s not that easy to get over indoctrination, you know. I grew up thinking
one thing.” He rubbed a hand up and down Tony’s arm. “It felt wonderful though. This, it felt good.”

“You’re okay with it?” Tony said as they held onto one another under the sea of soul stars.

“Mostly,” Steve said. His words were low and tender. “I know I have a ways to go, yet. To get there. But Sam and Nat are helping. Even Bruce. And you.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” Tony hated that part of him that bubbled up with his usual anxiety. For years Tony fought against the idea that his own self-worth depended on others’ view of him. That horrible gremlin reared its ugly head again as he sat in Steve’s arms.

“It is,” Steve said. As if reading his mind – and maybe he did – Steve added, “Don’t think this has anything to do with you, Tony. My own failings here are mine. It takes time to wipe away thought patterns and habits.”

Tony considered it; it all seemed reasonable enough. Yet something niggled at the back of his brain. “But what about you? Tell me that way back when you never considered being with – well – a guy?”

Steve bowed his head as if shame overcame him. “Tony.” He peered up at Tony. “Back then I put it out of my head. You need remember most of my life, I lived as a sickly kid. I hoped to get through the next month, the next year. I put the idea of ever having anyone out of my head.”

The harsh reality of it hurt Tony. “So you didn’t think about it at all?”

Steve shrugged and gazed at the projected soul network around them. “I used to watch the snow fall from my room. I sat there and stared out the frosted window. I’d see all the snow flakes and think about how they were all different. I knew I was different, but I couldn’t put it into words. Maybe I was afraid to. I had a friend, he was gay.” He stumbled over that last word. “The kids knew it too. They beat him up, teased him. It was terrible. I think I focused on my health, on helping my mom when I could. I knew I was different, but I didn’t want to know how.” He cleared his throat. “And then Peggy happened, and I have to admit, I was overjoyed, relieved that I found her attractive, that I wanted to dream about a life with her.”

“Because otherwise you were a pervert,” Tony said, and he admitted bitterness laced his words. Shit, they’d just made love and here Tony was stuck in the same fucking place.

Steve frowned but said, “Yes. I fully admit to that, Tony. But remember it wasn’t as accepted as it is today. You went to prison back then.” He caressed Tony’s arm, his chest. “It was different back then.”

“Well, it’s not all that accepted everywhere now. There are countries that outlaw it, that kill gay people. Shit, there are parts of this country that bend over backwards to make it so gay people don’t want to live there.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Steve said. He clasped Tony’s hand in his. “And I don’t want to be one of those people. I want to accept myself. Heck, I accepted my friend back in the day.”

“Do you worry that the universe decided for you?” Tony asked, and he hated to ask it because it revealed his own fears.

“I did,” Steve said. “But I don’t think so. I think the universe made me truthful to myself.” He nodded as if having an internal conversation. “Being truthful to yourself is the first step to happiness in some ways.”
Tony watched how Steve petted him, never let go of him. “Now you’re being philosophical.”

“I talked to Thor a little,” Steve said with a half-smile. “He’s a little freaked out, but he’s getting there.”

“Like we are?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, like we are.” And then Steve kissed him. Maybe, just maybe, Tony might come to an understanding of being Beloved in a soul pack.

Wrestling a clear understanding of soul packs and soul bonds still eluded Tony. He might be able to see the bonds amongst the team as networked and interlinked equations to solve, but the fact still remained that how to use that to their advantage hung like an anvil over their heads. His newfound relationship with Steve might offer an exciting new equation to explore, but the soul pack and how it would change the Avengers needed to be defined. It had been a good two years since the ring around Steve’s wrist had appeared. What had they done in that time to utilize it? Nothing. A few instances here and there had demonstrated that they had within their midst something tangible and powerful. Forging stronger bonds between all of them would utilize the power of the pack. Getting out of the city and to a place where they could investigate what it meant to be a soul pack, bonded team members would change everything.

In the next day, Clint announced that they would be traveling to his farm in the mid-west. He didn’t take questions so the team prepared to go. Tony showed up on Steve’s floor as he packed a duffle bag and shouldered his shield. It had only been yesterday that they’d found each other, and Tony longed to be closer to Steve, as close as he could manage. It felt as if a magnet drew him to Steve. He wondered if it was some kind of puppy love or if it was the soul bond strengthening.

When he appeared at Steve’s bedroom door, hands in pockets and a tight smile on his face, Steve returned the smile. “Hey. You ready?”

“Hey yourself.” He couldn’t really believe how nervous he felt. His palms sweated, his heart wanted to launch itself out of his chest (again), and the room momentarily spun around. He stayed planted at the doorway. “You think this is a good idea? Going off to the hinterlands.” He just wanted to find that little hut in the middle of nowhere that Strange sent them to and spend a few days or weeks just with Steve. How could he request that, when the pack needed them as well?

Steve chuckled. “Hinterlands? It’s a farm. And yes, I do. I think we need to have a secluded place where we can work on the soul bonds. And then plan our next move.”

Tony longed to say – what about us? Don’t you just want to explore this new thing. But Steve or rather Captain America had everything in order and his heart neatly placed aside – not mixing with business. So Tony forced himself to focus. “Our next move?” Tony felt like his words echoed in his head.

Steve zipped his bag closed. “Yeah. I know you don’t like the idea, but we need to find the rest of the pack.”

“Well, I never said that I didn’t like the idea. I’m just not sure about heading out without some plan. I’ve been working a little on that actually,” Tony said. While he hadn’t devoted a huge amount of time to their wayward pack members, he had to balance his equations with their nexus points as well. “I mean, when I check on the bonds through the equations-.”

“The bonds feel frayed.”
“I was going to say the equations don’t make much sense, like parts are missing,” Tony replied. He shrugged and had to smile because the admiration in Steve’s expression, the wonder in his eyes made Tony feel whole. It surprised him the difference between before and after – the vibrations, the very look of the world around him shifted, changed, and transformed. He couldn’t fathom a moment without Steve, now. Underneath it all – that scared the shit out of him. Even if he had to settle for Captain America and not just Steve Rogers sometimes.

“Don’t think like that,” Steve said and crossed the room. “I’m not leaving you. I know it took me a long time to figure things out, but I’m not leaving. I’m right here, right now. Even when I am acting more like Captain America.”

“Did you just read my mind?” Tony said.

Steve shook his head. “Not exactly? But I got a certain feeling, a tugging here.” He placed a hand on his chest. “Felt like you were falling into a chasm.”

When Tony concentrated on the energy binding them together the sensation of loss and flailing rammed hard into his chest and then the security, the hope, the wish from Steve caught him, brought him back to sanity. “Wow, I didn’t realize. I usually.” He blinked a few times and Steve grasped his shoulder. “I usually just see it mathematically. A little bit of the metaphysical, but mainly math helps me understand it. But that was freaky.”

“Well, that’s how I see it,” Steve replied. “I feel it like a physical manifestation. I want you to know, I’m not going to just walk out. Nothing is going to happen that will lead to that.”

Tony scoffed. “You can’t promise that, Cap.”

“Yes, I can.”

Before Tony could respond, JARVIS chimed in, “Sir, Agent Barton has informed me that the Quin Jet is ready for take-off. All are aboard and are awaiting your and Captain Rogers’ arrival.”

Tony pressed his lips together and then nodded. “Okay. J-man, my luggage transferred on board?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Onward,” Tony said with a gesture for Steve to lead the way. As they entered the elevator and it closed, Tony quelled his reservations. Once he’d looked at Pepper as an angel. Tony had thought that Malibu and Pepper would be his last refuge when in fact the world literally tumbled down on his head. How could he believe after a quickie blow job and hand job that Steve committed to him? That would be naïve and incredibly stupid. Even with Pepper, Tony fucked it up.

As they walked out onto the rooftop, the Quin Jet readied for take-off. Tony recalled how very perfect Pepper had been, how she tried everything to make him happy, how his soul embers were burnt and ash. When he glanced at Steve as they walked up the ramp to the jet, all Tony could think of was those frayed ends of his soul that had tangled and knotted to Steve. How the darkness within laid the foundation for the bond between them.

Boarding and then strapping in Tony kept his facial expression neutral. His doubts and anxieties were his own. The Quin Jet launched into the gray overcast sky. In a startling moment of clarity, Tony understood why soul packs stayed insular and set apart. It had nothing to do with their perfection and everything to do with their deficiencies. If soul packs faltered, then what happened to the members? He glanced around the jet as Barton deftly piloted it over the vast sprawling island below them. Each and every Avenger harbored some hurt or pain or flaw that could undo all the
possibilities that could be accomplished with the soul pack. His thoughts turned inward to his tenuous hold on Steve.

Their relationship blossomed, but that frail bloom would easily wilt if they didn’t feed it. If every bond existed as an equation, then Tony could solve them all. The equations predicted the outcomes of the bonds, he only needed to study them and comprehend their inner meanings. In the end it wasn’t just about solutions but the theory behind the equations.

Steve sat next to him and smiled as Tony met his gaze. With the fire of mathematics sizzling through him mind, Tony returned that smile, because he could figure out a way to ensure this worked, he resolved to do it. It shouldn’t be hard.

Unless of course there were unknowns Tony hadn’t considered.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading this story. I will post the next chapter around July 8th. Sorry for the delay but I will be going out of town for the next few weekends with the family. I hope you enjoyed it...

Up next: Unknowns come into play and Steve makes a leap...
Into the Unknown

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony explore their relationship in-depth. The team becomes a pack...

Chapter Notes

No beta - since my beta was on vacation for this chapter. I apologize!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well, we were too busy not knowing you existed.”

Steve glanced to the side and furrowed his brows. He recalled Tony saying that the equations for Clint didn’t add up, and that the holographic representation of Clint had a halo of uncertainty around it, but this – this surprised Steve. Standing in the middle of a farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere USA, Clint hugged his wife and children to him.

“Fury helped me keep it quiet. I didn’t want anyone to be in danger.” The soul bond that linked them all together vibrated with new energy as if the substantial strength of the family surrounding Clint shored up his own astral projection and, by association, empowered the pack. Steve shifted his shoulders, uncomfortable with the idea of a vulnerable family being in the line of fire.

Steve eyed Thor who had stepped on a toy and knocked it under the coffee table to hide it. Bruce hung in the background and Sam only arched a brow at Nat as she embraced the children she obviously knew. Maybe this was the unknown in the equations that Tony talked about for Nat as well.

“You homeschool the kids?” Sam asked. “Because if my father was a superhero and fought those alien things in New York, I’d be shouting it from the top of your barn out there. That is a barn, right?”

“It’s a barn, and no we don’t homeschool. The kids, they know what to do,” Clint’s wife said and then she offered her hand to Sam. “I’m Laura.”

Sam took it with a firm grasp. “Name’s Sam.”

“Oh, we know about the Falcon!” Cooper said. “Is it hard landing, because I don’t see how that bird suit is aerodynamic.” His eyes glittered with enthusiasm and Steve could see Sam having a hard time keeping himself in check. It was adorable to see Sam on the other end of the adoration.

Sam laughed and the tension in the room eased. “Bird suit?” The tension relaxed as Sam began an animated conversation with the boy.

Steve watched as the family accepted them into their home. He scanned the room, saw the trappings of another life, a different life and deep within him the hopes and dreams that he’d smothered as a
child resurfaced only to be slowly and painfully unraveled. What he witnessed before him remained elusive, almost foreign to him. He observed all of his team mates speaking to the children, gather like an extended family around Clint. They all were, in a way, since they were pack members. The bond seemed to extend and wrap them into an ancillary role. In some ways, it felt right and good for Clint, for the pack, yet Steve never felt more isolated and different. Slipping out, he went to the porch, stood there for a long moment, and then left. He walked. Just walked into the fields as if he could keep walking until he found what he sought in his heart.

Inside his core, in his chest his heart throbbed a battle beat like he fought the legions of the Red Skull again. He marched onward toward the fields of corn and barley. He ignored the whipping of the stalks as he trampled through the rows of corn. He thought of nothing but the need to go, to flee, to disappear. He refused the images of home, of the Tower, of his soul pack. His chest drained of hope and he ached. He could cover miles, he could keep going. No one would find him. He could cut himself off and never see another soul again.

Except a large armored suited team mate hovered over him. The glint of the metal almost blinding in the sunlight. Steve stopped and squinted up at the armor. The faceplate retracted, and Tony said, “Jesus, Steve, what the hell are you doing?”

Steve only swallowed down the acidity of the bile, the taste of metal a reminder that he was a messenger of war and nothing else. Who was Steve Rogers? Nothing but a war machine, a tool of the powers that forged wars all over the world. Not a family man, never a family man.

“Where are you going?” Tony said as he floated over Steve in the middle of the field.

Steve glanced around, glancing into the setting sun as it glinted off the leafy waves of corn. “I don’t know.” That truth hurt. He ran, and Steve never ran from a fight, but what he escaped had nothing to do with a fight even if his heart and his muscles yearned for the combat because it was a simpler foe. That’s all he was good for anyway.

Tony set the armor down and then it opened. He walked out of it and straight up to Steve. He wrapped his arms around him and pushed Steve’s rigid body toward him, holding him. Steve stayed frozen, stiffened by his own feelings of loss and isolation.

“You don’t get to do this. Not this. You’re cutting yourself away. Again. You can’t do this every time. I can’t be part of this without you.” Tony held on as if a tsunami battered them.

Through the bond, Tony’s heart beat in unison with Steve’s. He felt the twinge of it, the emptiness pervading it. He remembered the chill of the ice. How the darkness of the ocean danced around him, like water spirits taunting him. The horror of the frigid world, trapped forever in the gloom, beckoned him. “Maybe I shouldn’t have ever been found.”

“What the hell?” Tony pulled away from Steve. “Why the hell would you say that? I realize that SHIELD never tried to help you through your transition, that Nat did most of it. But hell why, why would you say that to me? To your pack members? Why?”

Silently, Steve looked back to the distant house and the reverberations of pack and family hit him. It hurt more than he wanted to confess. “It’s just that it will never be me.”

Tony stepped away. “This is about the family and the whole gay thing again?”

Steve shook his head. “No.” The word exploded every belief Steve had, because when he marched away from the house, when he started to walk maybe part of him thought it was his fears of his own perversion, but now as he denied it, something changed in him. “No, it’s not. It’s that.” He looked at
the distant house, the scatterings of living life. “I’ve never lived a life. I just fought and battled and
died. When I woke up, they told me the world was being invaded by aliens and I fought again. I got
a tattoo on my wrist that tells me I’m part of a pack, but I didn’t consolidate it. I ignored it. I ignored
it because I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be that family in there.” He pointed at
the house, jabbing his finger at the hot memories. “I don’t know how to be anything but Captain
America anymore. I’m not Steve Rogers, he died. He died seventy years ago.” He couldn’t help the
tears that stung his eyes. He wiped them away. There was no time for crying. He was a leader and
nothing more.

“No,” Tony answered back the same word that Steve had used. “No. You are alive, and you are
well. The universe didn’t call on Captain America, the universe called on Steve Rogers.”

Steve closed his eyes and steadied himself before looking at Tony again. “It doesn’t feel like it. I feel-
.” He shut his mouth. From his time, men didn’t share, men kept quiet.

Tony grasped his hand. “It’s me. I’m here, for you not for Captain America. I get it. I get that the
dreams you had are back there in that house. The dreams you had are in the past. But are the dreams
you could have now, are they that bad?”

Steve studied Tony’s hand clasped to his own. The roughness of it belied the fact that he was a
billionaire. The calluses, the whisper of stains on the nails, all said something else, something
different. Tony was different than Steve had assumed.

“Is it that bad to think or dream a different dream?”

Steve squeezes his lips together and shook his head. “I guess not.”

“You guess?” Tony scoffed. “Come on, you have the most valuable bachelor Tony Stark, standing
in the middle of a corn field professing he wants to dream a future with you. You have to be
impressed with that.”

Something rooted in his soul and Steve couldn’t deny it. “Is that what you’re doing?”

Tony paused before he answered, and the glimmer of joviality left his eyes. “Yes, that’s what I’m
doing.”

“Oh,” Steve said, and it wasn’t an exclamation of disgust or hate, or even fear. Instead he felt blessed
and hopeful. As he stood there, the meaning of the words changed him. Sure, he’d dallied a little,
played with the idea of being with Tony, and he even allowed those taboo actions from the dream
space to become reality, but he’d only skirted the idea. He’d played with it, teased it in his mind. He
recalled the warmth that spread over him when he was with Tony – he thought it might be love,
something strong and purposeful. But now he saw it might be something on both sides. Tony offered
him something more than just the casual moment in time. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Tony said and clung to Steve’s hand as if he held him from drowning.

“Yeah, oh,” Steve responded and the hurt he felt in the house behind him faded and a new light, a
new idea began to flicker within him, around him. It perplexed him until he realized it was their souls
entangled and woven together. Steve released his fear, and the bond between them flourished like a
vine reaching toward the sunlight. Tony must have read the same thing, must have experienced Steve
embracing the idea through their souls because he gathered Steve to him and didn’t wait for an
invitation to kiss him. Steve drank the kiss in, tasted it with a new fevered hunger. Through the kiss
he communicated his acceptance and his own offering. It wasn’t frustration or exhaustion with his
old indoctrination, but his actions entrenched in the feelings overwhelming him and flowing through
the bond. He could no more deny Tony, than he could stop breathing.

Tony stumbled back from the kiss, a look of pure excitement and astonishment on his face. “You really go for something when you decide, don’t you?”

Steve smiled ruefully at Tony. “I’ve never been a subtle person. Have you seen my uniform?”

Tony grinned. “Then you’ll be happy to know that Clint’s wife said we had to double up in the sleeping arrangements.”

Steve only laughed. They traipsed back through the corn, the armor following in the air. Clint grumbled how they had no respect for the land and the work a farmer put in, but seemed to reflect back their happiness.

Eating at a dining room table that looked like it might have been forged by giants since it sat twelve, Steve found himself enjoying the dinner. That hollow empty abyss stayed closed inside of him, smaller and contained. Tony clutched his hand every now and again as if to check in with him and ask him if he was okay.

“So you’re here to do a little bit of training with your soul pack?” Laura asked as she tore a chunk of bread from the baguette. Bowls of spaghetti, meatballs, and sauce clustered in the center of the table. Several baguettes were piled up as well. Clint placed a few large serving bowls of mixed greens on the table before he took his seat by his wife.

“I’m sorry. About the pack. I mean I wouldn’t have-.” Steve didn’t know how to continue, but Natasha chimed in.

“You know you do that a lot. Apologize for bringing people into the pack. Ask anyone here if they hate it or resent it. Ask them.” Natasha tilted her head to the rest of the members of the team. The kids sat there staring at the Avengers with wide eyes and silly grins.

When Steve studied each of their expressions, he knew that Natasha set him up. “No, no thank you. I’ll pass.” Instead he served himself some of the spaghetti as the team started to talk about training exercises.

“We should definitely start with meditation,” Bruce said. “I like meditation.”

Tony chuckled, “You can’t meditate big purple aliens off the planet.”

“What big purple aliens?” Lily asked as Laura hushed her. Clint only grinned in what Steve could only described as supreme pride of his little family.

“He’s just joking. There are no purple aliens,” Steve said.

“But they are big,” Tony said and then winked at the little girl. She giggled and tossed her head in delight.

“Okay, now enough,” Laura ended the discussion on purple aliens.

“Meditation is good, but I think we need to set up a couple of exercises where we need to get in contact with one another, work through the bond at some distance.” Steve forked a meatball.

“Combat exercises would help us hone the pack bond.”

“IT would be good if we had some opponents, but since we do not, I think we must work in pairs and over a distance. In this way we may be able to coordinate and do these war games you wish,” Thor
said and scooped up another bowl of pasta. Clint flinched and then stood up. 

“I’ll boil some more water for more pasta,” he said. He filled the largest pot with water and started the stove top again.

“We could call in help for an opposing team,” Natasha added. “I could call in Hill, maybe Sharon. I don’t think war games will work with the soul pack. We can really shut off communication through the pack or direct it as precisely as we need to except for in special cases.” She pointedly stared at Steve and Tony as they clasped hands.

Steve frowned and ignored her indirect reference to his relationship. “I think you’re right. We need another group but Sharon and Maria are not enough.”

“There are other trustworthy agents from SHIELD,” Natasha said.

“I could call in Rhodey and possibly Pepper. I have armor for both,” Tony said and then he smirked. “I’ll just call in the Legion. We can program them to attack but not to kill and see what we can lay down as strategy.”

“Good idea,” Steve said. “I like it. No one will get hurt and we’ll practice.”

“War games!” Thor said and picked up his glass as if to throw it, but Sam caught his arm and shook his head. “Oh yes. No throwing in front of the little ones.”

They laughed, and the dinner continued with various plans concocted and then tossed. When they finally climbed the stairs for bed, the team was exhausted but happy. Steve said good night to them and thanked both Laura and Clint for their hospitality. He held Laura’s hand a moment too long.

“No, thank you for believing in Clint,” Laura said and then went upstairs with Clint.

Steve gathered up the blankets and pillows from the couch as Tony trailed after him. “Where are you going?”

“The barn,” Steve said.

“Barn?” Tony grabbed his luggage. “That does not sound comfortable.”

“Clint said he has a little space up in the loft. Pull-out bed,” Steve said and then shrugged. “Seems as good a place as any.”

“The barn?” Tony screwed up his face.

“Good a place as any for some privacy,” Steve said, picked up his duffle and walked out of the house.

“Privac- holy shit! You really are going all in, aren’t you?” Tony rushed after him. He grabbed his bag as he followed Steve.

Pillows and blankets bundled in his arms, Steve lifted a shoulder. “I’m not saying I can immediately come out to the world, but I can come out to those I trust.” The words flowed like the rapids of a river. Stopping them, stopping the possibilities might be like trying to halt that river. No dam would do it.

“Okay, I get it, I get it,” Tony said but his expression looked glorious and his smile beamed in the
moonlight. “I hope you know you’re, you’re important to me outside of this whole soul pack thing. I mean, it might have taken longer to get here but I have to believe.”

In the middle of the yard, Steve stopped, took all of the beauty of Tony in, and said, “Me too.”

They started again, and Tony muttered, “So fucking glad I always bring lube.”

Steve burst out laughing as they entered the barn. The stench might have impeded them, but as they climbed to the loft and found their way to the back of the barn and opened the door to the small room the smell wafted away. When they closed the door entirely the smell faded to only that of hay and raw wood. In the corner of the 8 foot by 10 foot room a small potbellied stove sat. Next to it several different bows were lined up on the wall. Opposite of the black stove, the threadbare blue couch with multiple slumped cushions sat. To the right side of the couch a window opened to the fresh air of the farm around them. No glass, but a sliding barn door to close over it, if they chose to use it.

Tony turned on a small lamp on the table and blinked a few times. It occurred to Steve that he probably hadn’t seen the lay of the land without the illumination. Steve dropped the blankets and pillows on the couch. He sure as hell hoped it was a pullout because there was no way they were going to fit on the couch together.

“Not bad,” Tony said. “Wish it was a little more romantic.” He dropped his bag. “I would have liked to make your first time more memorable.”

“What’s not memorable?” Steve said and mustered his courage to cross the small space and place his hands on Tony’s hips. If he allowed himself, then Tony’s eyes captured him. He never wanted to struggle away from that gaze, that wonder, that glittering brilliance.

“Stop,” Tony said in a hushed voice. “You’re making me blush.”

Steve cupped a hand against Tony’s cheek. “Is that so bad?”

“I don’t think I’ve blushed since I was eleven, twelve at the most.” Tony sighed into Steve’s touch and then he brightened. “This is really happening.”

“Yeah, I think we might have tried a little before, you know.” Steve leaned closer, his lips only inches from Tony’s mouth. “Maybe this time doesn’t have to be so rushed.”

Tony pushed forward and brought them together in a kiss that both surprised and satisfied. Steve opened up not only his mouth but his soul’s core to Tony. Tony with his innate skills accepted the offering and their soul threads wove, slowly, intricately together. Each strand merged into a new thread of life linking them together. The kiss deepened and coiled a fire within Steve, but the physicality of it dimmed in comparison to how deftly Tony brought their souls’ energies together. Tony paused, panting for a moment.

“Maybe, maybe we should set up the bed?” Tony smiled up at Steve and he looked younger, almost innocent in his request. They, together, meant something to Tony and that made it all worth it to Steve.

“Yeah, I think so.” As Steve gathered up the pillows and blankets, Tony closed the door and found a bolt to lock it. Steve placed the linens on the floor, retrieved the cushions from the couch, and then pulled out the bed. It sagged in the middle and promised a helluva back ache tomorrow, but it looked glorious to Steve. “I’ll make up the bed for us.” He wanted to do something because his heart took loops in his chest that caused his hands to quake and his breath to catch.

“Good,” Tony said and went to his bag. “I have some supplies.” He stated it like he was ashamed.
“I’m glad,” Steve replied. “It’s good.” Once he finished with the bed, he glanced at the open window. “Do you want me to close it?”

Tony shook his head. “Not really. I think it helps keep the animal smell to a minimum.”

“Probably right,” Steve agreed. He stood there, not knowing what to do with his hands and his legs jittered. “Well, I-. I finished.” He gestured to the bed like he presented a prized cow or something equally as ridiculous in the situation.

Tony tossed a tube on the bed as well as a few face cloths. He reached out a hand across the small mattress. “Okay, can we - can I undress you?” He sounded as nervous as Steve felt.

Steve got on the bed, kneeling his way over to Tony. “Sure.” Tony joined him on the bed and went to unbutton Steve’s shirt – though his hands were shaking. Steve clasped them. “I’m nervous too.”

“I didn’t think I would be,” Tony said and worked at the button. “It’s not like me at all.”

“Maybe you’re getting some of my nerves in a feedback loop?” Steve suggested. He really hoped no one in the house could feel them.

Tony read his mind. “I think I cut us off in the soul bonds. It feels like it anyway, but I -. I have to admit that I don’t think this is all from you. I just- I want this to work out. I’m serious about this. This isn’t just one of my passing fancies, you know.”

“Passing fancies? Did you look up that turn of phrase just so I would understand it?” Steve chuckled.

Tony rolled his eyes. “No, actually my mother used it all the time with Howard. The bastard wasn’t always that dedicated to my mother.”

Steve held Tony’s hands to his chest. “I’m sorry, Tony. I really am.”

Tony shook his head. “Howard isn’t you. What he did- he did himself. Had nothing to do with you at all. I see that.” He searched Steve’s face. “I want this to work out.”

“Me too, so let’s see how we do – just the two of us.”

It seemed like an age until they were fully disrobed. They took their time, Tony slowly removed each article of clothing from Steve, then Steve doing the same for Tony. They paused at each moment, kissing and exploring. Anytime Steve shuddered with hesitation and fear, Tony strung their souls together and it relaxed them both – Steve brought Tony down to the bed. It wasn’t too uncomfortable but having Tony laying on top of him helped. To feel body to body, the heat, increased Steve’s need.

He couldn’t shake the feeling of inadequacy as well as the thought that he might be too big for his own body. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do. I haven’t been with a guy.”

Tony shifted and sat up on top of Steve. The way he moved showed not only his own comfort with his body but also with Steve’s as well. Steve envied that ease. Tony ran his hands down Steve’s chest. “Let me tell you something. Sex isn’t about what to put where, not if you want it to mean something. It isn’t about putting your leg here or your hand there, or if I want to touch you like this.” He caressed his hand along Steve’s side and down to his groin, lightly stroking his hardening erection. “It’s about what we both want. It’s about what you think feels good and what I think feels good and if we can give that to one another.”

“I don’t know how to-.”
Tony placed a finger on Steve’s lips. “All you have to do is be truthful to yourself.”

For all the days since he awoke it had been one thing that had been the hardest thing for Steve to do – be truthful with himself. He pretended he could adjust without mourning the loss of his life and his dreams. He ignored his own soul pack and team because it meant connection, something that would anchor him in the present – a present he still called the future in his head. Since he woke up from the ice, he denied the truth of his soul, bared and open, to Tony. Maybe that was one of the reasons he hadn’t bonded that first time. The thought of having a man as a lover terrified him so much that he lied to himself and shunned the idea of his own attraction.

Now Tony was before him, like a feast for a starving man. Tony bent over him, a smile etched across his face. Steve could no more deny the truth. He encompassed Tony in his arms, his strong arms that were made for war but could be gentle for loving as well. In the next moments, he learned, and he taught. He understood another body and he learned more about his own body. Tony touched him and kissed him. When Steve returned the favor the heightened breaths, the shiver against him thrilled Steve. It encouraged a touch to the flank, that slide down to cup Tony’s cheek and teased against his ass. Tony continued Steve’s education in both a physical and metaphysical way. As Steve nuzzled against him, testing his teeth on Tony’s nipples, Tony panted and gasped but also knitted their souls into more intricate patterns, connected and networked together in tight harmony. When Tony showed Steve the lube and slipped some of it on his own fingers to prepare himself, Steve hitched a breath and wondered if he might go into an asthma attack. Watching Tony enter himself with fingers sizzled Steve’s neurons and sang through the soul bond. He didn’t realize it could be like this, that he could enjoy and lose the inhibitions of his day. When Tony guided Steve inside, Steve perched over him holding his breath. He hated the idea of hurting anyone, especially Tony. With encouragement, Steve pushed inside, and the sensation stole his conscious thought, ate the air from his lungs, throbbed his blood in his ears until he thought he might go deaf from it.

Steve let himself feel all of it, seeing the intense joy on Tony’s face. He tested a thrust and Tony literally quaked with need beneath him. It sent a spike of delight and want through Steve – to know he had that effect. He started a slow rhythm and found Tony squirming beneath him, begging Steve for more, grabbing at him and kissing him with wild need. He stroked in a mad pace but then eased down to send a howl of desire from Tony. Hovering over Tony, Steve grinned. “You are a little bastard, aren’t you?” Tony whispered, his tone playful.

“How much do you want it?” Steve said, and he had to admit, he enjoyed the knowledge that he could do this to Tony, that Tony would beg him would want him. He pulled out and hung on the edge and then rammed back inside of Tony. He repeated it until Tony admitted his need.

“More than you can know,” Tony said and grappled for Steve again.

As he pounded into Tony, Steve reached out within their soul bond and with his energies bound Tony, brought their resonance together until they were completely and utterly merged with one another. Their crests and ebbs synchronized and pulsed a beat along with their physical beings. It slammed into Steve like a bullet – yet instead of pain it brought with it a heated pleasure. On the brink, Steve barely understood the motion of his body as Tony met him stroke for stroke. He followed Tony’s hand as it worked his own erection, he watched as Tony arched back and cried out. Throwing his head back, Steve released his physical hold and succumbed to the bond itself. He cried out as the world around him dissipated and their energies perfectly met. The fires within spoke and he came as Tony spilled over his hand.

Panting, he awakened from the soul bond and found himself still joined with Tony. His arms trembled and he fell forward, though he carefully laid next to Tony, pulling out as he did. Tony
curled next to him and Steve let his mind go to a kind of blankness.

“Hey,” Tony said. “You okay?”

Steve held Tony close, brought him to his chest. “Yeah, yeah more than okay.”

“You feel a little distant,” Tony said, and Steve recognized the concern in his tone.

Steve looked at Tony. “I just can’t believe it. That this is what we are. That I’m -.“ He stopped and then swallowed. “That I’m finally home.”

Their next moment were something sacred and careful. Tony kissed him and explored him, and Steve marked it as the beginning of their relationship. Not the moment he met him as part of the Avengers, not the day in his apartment when they didn’t bond, not even the moment they bonded, nor the day that Steve had his first hand job, but this moment. The moment when they both freely and openly accepted the Beloved bond between them. They slept entangled with one another and the next morning, Steve welcomed Tony into his body as the sun dawned and painted the landscape outside of the barn in hues of orange and red. He fought against his own dying fears as Tony entered him, as he surrendered to the truth within and became who he was meant to be.

After, Tony held Steve as he shivered and wept. He couldn’t say why he cried. Was it for joy or fear or loss or love? He didn’t know. But being with Tony kept him safe. They lay on the bed, staring out of the barn window as the day matured when a rapping on the door roused them from their nest.

“Yeah?” Tony said.

“Mrs. Clint wanted to know if you two love birds are coming to breakfast,” Sam called from the other side of the door.

Steve frowned but Tony answered. “In a bit.”

“Hurry up, she’s not a woman to be dallied with,” Sam replied and then they heard him head back to the house.

“Oh well,” Steve said and then he exhaled. “Time for reality.”

Tony shifted and got up on one elbow. “Are you going to be okay?” He wiped away the last of the tears.

“More than that,” Steve said. “Sorry, don’t know why I got all emotional. I’m usually not like that.”

“Probably because of that,” Tony said and kissed him. “We finally made it.”

Steve smiled and cradled Tony’s face in his hands. “Yeah we did.” No part of him regretted it. In fact, he wanted to rejoice that the burden of self-denial had been lifted.

They spent a little more time in each other’s arms, but then cleaned up as much as they could in the barn and hustled over to the house. Once there they took turns showering and then went to the kitchen for breakfast. Clint was cooking again, and Steve went to help as Tony and Bruce huddled in the corner making plans for their war games today.

“You like to cook?” Steve asked.

Clint shrugged. “Laura spends a lot of time taking care of the kids when I’m not here. I try and lift the burden from her as much as possible when I’m here.”
“You’re happy? Settled down like this?” Steve thought about the brand on Clint’s arm and the guilt welled up enough that the acrid taste of bile filled his mouth.

“Yeah, but I like the team too. Don’t get me wrong. I love my family. But I want to do good. It’s part of who I am. Laura’s great because she accepts that,” Clint said as he flipped over the eggs in the frying pan. “Plus, I have a lot to make up for because of Loki.”

Steve eyed Thor sitting in the living room with both of Clint’s children on his lap. “No ill will for Thor?”

“His brother did it to me, not Thor,” Clint said and slid the eggs from the pan onto a plate.

“You don’t have to make up for what Loki did to you,” Steve said and wondered if he was only practicing for when he would eventually find Bucky.

“No, I don’t. But I need to,” Clint said. He reached over to a cowbell hung on the wall. “Foods up.” He rang the bell, and everyone gathered around the huge dining room table again.

Breakfast turned into a raucous affair. Steve found himself smiling and laughing and holding Tony’s hand as much as he could possibly considering they were both eating. The food was good, the coffee better. When they finished up, Thor and Sam took cleaning duty and Tony announced that the Iron Legion would be arriving within the half hour.

“Okay,” Steve said and clapped his hands. “Boot up.” He looked at Laura. “Ma’am if you could keep the children in the house.”

She nodded. “Will do.”

Over the course of the next few days they worked on their battle patterns as Avengers, though the soul pack interaction came with more difficulty. With the Iron Legion as their enemy, Tony had fashioned a vest for each of them to wear. The Legion would target the vest with lasers, much like simple laser tag, but the vest was more complicated and advanced. One hit didn’t necessarily mean dead, but it would mean different injuries. It wasn’t easy getting the injuries to transfer along the soul bonds. Steve and Natasha had been on missions for SHIELD where he could tell if she had an injury long before she admitted it. The soul pack worked for zeroing in on intentions and locations, but with the Legion not using lethal force they were falling behind on backing each other up and circling the wagons.

Late one night, Steve climbed up to the loft room in the barn to find that Tony had all the vests spread out on the floor. He had a connection to JARVIS through his phone. “Can you adjust the interface?” Steve cocked a brow at Tony, trying to quietly ask him what he was doing. He only raised a finger and then said to JARVIS. “If you adjust it to give a little jolt, a shock, that would surprise the participant-.”

“Tony!” Steve said.

He only shook his head. Cooler heads did not prevail, and Tony got his way. The next day, neither Steve nor Tony mentioned that he’d rigged all the vests with what Steve thought amounted to a shock collar for dog training. He didn’t like it and had argued with Tony about it. As Steve fitted his on over his uniform, he frowned. Tony only pressed his finger to Steve’s lips.

“How is this going to work with you,” Steve said under his breath. Tony hadn’t suited up yet. “I doubt you’ll feel anything through the armor.”

“I wear the vest under the armor, Stevie-boy. Don’t worry about it,” Tony said with a smile. “Let’s
go Cap.”

The whole team awaited his call and the Legion were out in the fields in anticipation of the war games. Laura had the kids up in their rooms, watching from the windows. He was fairly certain she even popped popcorn for the occasion.

He tilted his head, released a breath, and said, “Okay then, Avengers Assemble.”

The entire group left the porch of the farmhouse as a Legion robot hovered near the clearing. Through his earpiece, JARVIS updated them on the scenario. According to the new war game the Legion combatants gathered near the creek on the Barton property. There, they planned on poisoning the water.

“Thor, take to the air. Give us a report out on their defenses. Iron Man, go with him and don’t shoot until we have an idea if there are any civilians in the area.” JARVIS indicated civilians through audible signals and Tony relayed vital statistics from his feed from JARVIS through the HUD. “Clint and Nat – go toward the west and see if you can feed the Legion toward Sam and I. We’ll be at the fork of the creek. Bruce, I need you to stay behind today. I need to see if when things escalate you can control the Hulk until we call a code green.” Bruce nodded and settled on a chair on the porch. Steve was certain he would be pacing the length of the porch over the next hour.

As the team rushed off, Sam glared at Steve. “You just want me to cart your ass over there.”

Steve snickered in return. “Not necessary.” He raced off down the pathway over the hill toward the creek. He heard Sam take off into the air. The last few days had been different for Steve. Not only with Tony but with the team. Things felt different. Together on the farm, the team not only worked on their battle prowess but also bonded in other ways. Laura had taken part in it too. At night she suggested they spend time at the fire pit and they all roasted marshmallows and cooked hotdogs as Thor told stories of the Nine Realms.

As the fire flickered in the center of their group, the buzz from their soul bonds grew and wrapped them all, even the ones not bonded into a security shield. With his eyes closed Steve could feel each energy signature. The last days had taught him the resonance and vibrancy of each of their souls. Now as he found his way through the thicket to the creek, he reached out to each soul to enhance the data that JARVIS streamed through the comms.

First, he went back toward Bruce who met him easily. Bruce was using his energy signature to check on the health and status of each of them. That was promising. With Bruce monitoring each of the pack members for their health and well-being, Steve turned towards their strategic points. Both Nat and Clint were following the stream, but Clint was on high alert, eyes always scanning as the energies from Nat were more subtle- reading the more grounded signs. A skip in her energy waves told Steve she discovered something before she actually called it in.

Her voice came in crisp over the comm. “We got hostiles closing on positions north of the fork.”

A reverberation from Thor answered the call. “The Legion awaits near the outer meadow. Several have approached the water’s edge.”

“Might be a good time to engage,” Iron Man answered. “JARVIS has clustered the civilians near the Legion in the outer meadow. Looks like we have hostiles and civilian signatures as their shield.”

Steve never liked that idea, but the fact remained that they had to be ready for anything when it came to battle. “Sam confirm the civilians.”
“Will do.”

As Sam took off to the north, Steve felt the stretch of their bond and the pain it took for Sam to leave Steve alone. “Stay steady, Falcon.”

“Got it,” Sam said.

With so many out in the field, Steve had to keep the Soul Mantra in his head otherwise the sheer spread of their energies while working on the same task might cause chaos along the lines. The Mantra assisted in their concentration. He heard a flash of thunder and saw lightning up head. “Thor?”

“This way, Captain. It looks as if the Legion has begun their testing of the waters.”

“Close in. Iron Man take them out at the water’s edge.”

He saw a streak of red and gold as Iron Man darted through the sky into the wooded area near the creek. Streaks of energy jumped through the air and he smelled the distinct odor of ozone telling him that the fighting had begun in earnest. He rushed to the creek to find at least a half dozen Legion robots were turned toward the sky, targeting Thor, Iron Man, and Falcon. With a swing he threw his shield in an arc that crashed through two of the Legion and knocked another one to the ground.

From Steve’s count that still left another three mobile at the creek’s edge. He dashed forward as the shield came back to his hand and then pummeled one of the Legion trying to get up. He hadn’t meant to hit it that hard because it was clear it would need major repair work to play anymore war games.

An echo from the soul bond alerted him to Nat approaching from his flank just as Clint circled around. Two of the Legion fired at the same time. Steve threw his shield to protect Nat but at the same time pushed his soul energy toward Clint. The bolt of energy helped Clint leap out of the way and onto a tree branch at least twenty feet in the air. Clint saluted him as Nat came over to him with his shield.

“Let’s do this,” Nat said. She handed him the shield as Clint swing down from the tree.

Iron Man called, “We have hostiles taking out civilians in the field.”

Even though the civilians were only decoys – electronic signatures created by JARVIS – it still bothered Steve to hear the report. He never wanted civilians to be in the line of fire. “Copy that,” Steve answered. “Go!”

Both Nat and Clint followed orders without question as Steve went to work on the three remaining Legion at the creek. Two shot into the air and fired on him immediately. He arced the shield to deflect the fire and it ricocheted to hit one of the other Legion robots. As The last Legion robot on the ground shot at him but Steve raced at it, kicked it in the chest to disable it and then, as he tumbled to the ground, threw his shield to take out the last Legion robot.

Just as he rolled to stand up a cry vibrated through the bond. “Nat!”

“Been hit,” she replied. “Fuck that hurts. What did Stark do?”

JARVIS reported, “Captain, Agent Romanoff’s reading states that in reality she is fine but in the game she is gravely injured.”

“Stay down, Nat,” Steve said as he got to his feet. “Clint are you near Nat?”
“Yes but engaged.”

Grabbing his shield, Steve ran over the uneven terrain trying to avoid the down branches and slippery mud. “Sam, get to Nat.”

“On my way,” Sam yelled back.

Steve scrambled over the branches as he heard Iron Man order, “We have incoming. The Legion has surrounded your position.”

“Son of a -.” Steve said as he climbed up the hill toward the meadow only to be confronted by another six Legion robots. One raised its palm to shoot but Steve rammed it with the shield and then pitched himself to roll back down the hill. “Iron Man, I need your help.”

As he called out, the harmonics of the soul pack juddered. “Thor, guidance, now!”

“I will hit them with lightning from the outside. I recommend you congregate together at the fork.”

“You heard the man- demi-god, whatever. Circle the wagons,” Iron Man said.

Steve doubled back, trying to find his team mates. He couldn’t spot them, but with the soul bonds to lead him, he followed their trail to the fork. Clint and Sam had Nat (who was sitting and looking a little bit more than pissed) covered. Steve joined them at the small island at the fork of the creek. He waded through the ankle deep water and took up position.

“Captain, it appears that the Legion has hacked into your comm systems,” JARVIS reported.

“Radio silence,” Steve ordered and then used the soul pack connections to check on his team. Thor wrangled the rest of the Legion toward them while Iron Man tried to pick them off one by one, but there were too many to stop.

“Do we need to call code green?” Clint asked as his shoulders tensed, bow at the ready.

“Not yet, not yet,” Steve said through gritted teeth. He searched the trees surrounding them. He could hear the whirl of gears but he spotted nothing. Stretching out his sixth sense, he interlaced his consciousness with Tony’s – easily. “Where?” he whispered.

Doubled around, to the south and west.

“To the south and west,” Steve said just as the Legion burst through the trees. Too many. “Shit.”

Clint launched arrows into the field of robots as Sam rocketed into the air, guns at the ready. Steve crouched down, protecting Nat from the barrage of fire. Thunder cracked through the sky as rain suddenly broke from a cloudless day. Iron Man whizzed passed them but the fire power from the Legion blinded Steve as he expanded his soul to encompass all of his pack.

With a stretch of his soul Steve called out, Code Green

Almost instantly, he heard a howl from the far distant farm house. Tony set down next to Steve and shot off fireworks of his own, blasting his own Legion as parts sprayed over them. Clint yelped and collapsed next to Steve, cursing as his vest flashed red. The steady red light meant he took a lethal hit while Natasha’s continued to blink. Both of them sat on the ground at his feet with looks of disdain.

As the lightning hurtled across the landscape, the Hulk slammed through the small thicket and pounced on the Legion. In seconds, half of the crew had been dismantled. Tony cursed. “He’s not supposed to do that.”
Clint laughed while Natasha made little moaning noises. “I’m dying here. Respect my peace.”

“I’m already dead, I can laugh as much as I want,” Clint returned.

“Silence,” Steve ordered and listened as both Thor and Hulk finished the work of the team. “Natasha up and at ‘em. Lullaby time.”

She stood up as the last of the Legion succumbed to Hulk. He started to play with one of the robots, swinging it back and forth. Brushing off her pants, she started to go over to the Hulk when a trio of Legion robots appeared to north of their position. They shot without regard, spraying the area with fire. Tony took one hard to the chest and was flung into the creek. Thor brought the lightning around and lit them up, but not before they spread another round of fire at the island. Steve’s vest blinked red as Falcon was knocked out of the sky and fell to the ground. Steve immediately went to him, but Sam only waved him off, his vest gave a steady red color.

“Hulk, smash the rest.”

It only took another few seconds and, in those moments, Steve rounded up the energy signatures, checking on everyone until he realized that his ping to Tony hadn’t come back. He grappled back to his feet and sloshed through the water to Tony. Muddy waters surrounded Tony, but the armor remained silent. “Tony, Tony!”

Steve knelt by the silent armor and dropped his shield to the side. He grabbed at the faceplate and said, “JARVIS update on Iron Man.”

“Sir is not responding to my hails.”

Steve ripped at the helmet and managed to pull loose the faceplate. He tossed it aside and to reveal Tony’s bruised face. Black eye and cut on his cheek. Steve pressed the comm bud in his ear. “JARVIS give me some stats on Tony.”

“It seems that the vest malfunctioned when he was hit and delivered a shock twice the normal setting. Minor burns to the chest, though. He is unconscious.”

Steve found the link to the vest on the armor. He struggled and managed to get his arms under the armor. Lifting, he brought Tony out of the water and to the dry shore. “Retract the armor.”

JARVIS asked, “Captain?”

“Retract the armor.”

JARVIS submitted to the order and the armor fell away from Tony. Steve grasped the vest and tore it away along with the front of Tony’s shirt. Quickly, Steve pulled off his own vest and the jacket and shirt of his uniform, to leave his chest bare. He wrapped his arms around Tony and brought his limp body into a sitting position as the rest of his pack gathered around him. He felt the pulse of their energies supporting his own. Instead of thinking about them, Steve touched his Beloved marks on his chest to Tony’s marks. The physicality enhanced the harmonic resonance of their soul bond. Skin to skin, the warmth between them heated their skin and Steve closed his eyes. He listened to his pack, gathered around him in a protective circle. Saw Clint stand at the ready to fight, felt Natasha and Sam lend their energies to his, while Thor and Bruce led the way through the rhythms of their souls. Steve brought it all together and offered their strength to Tony.

The patterns on his chest burned and he cringed against it, but then in his arms, Tony jerked and gasped a breath. Steve opened his eyes to see Tony startling awake. “Wha? What?”
Ignoring the tears prickling his eyes, Steve brushed Tony’s hair back from his face, kissed his temple and then his mouth. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

Tony clung to him, his face buried in Steve’s shoulder. He shivered and then turned his head. “I feel like Thor just hit me with his lightning.”

Steve kissed his neck. “The vest malfunctioned and gave you a shock. You were out cold.”

“So that’s the reason we’re all having a séance in the middle of the woods and we’re naked?” Tony mocked but he refused to release Steve.

“Well, we’re not totally naked. And yes, I suppose so,” Steve said and smiled. He cupped Tony’s cheek and then kissed him fully and completely.

Clint whooped and Bruce came back to himself next to Natasha as she touched her brand to his wrist. Clint pointed to Natasha. “I told you. I told you they were doing the nasty in the barn.”

“That’s enough of that,” Steve said. Clint smirked and then a short ring signaled a call from his wife. He shrugged and walked a slight distance away for privacy.

“What is this nasty?” Thor asked.

“Some Guide you are,” Sam scoffed and wrapped an arm around Thor’s shoulder – though it was a stretch. “Let me explain some things to you.”

“Can you walk?” Steve said as he turned his attention to Tony. “I can carry you if you need me-.”

“No, no,” Tony said and stumbled to try and stand.

“Let me help,” Steve said and lent a hand and shoulder for Tony to lean on.

As they stood on the banks of the creek, Tony surveyed the damage to his armor and to the remains of the Legion. “Phew, that’s a mess. I’ll call in the cleaning crew tomorrow. How’d we do otherwise?”

Steve sighed and shook his head. “Not great.” Though it was better than expected. The information along the pack lines was clarifying. More practice would make them a well oiled machine.

Clint turned to Steve as he picked up his bow. “Just got a call from my better half. We better get our asses in gear because we have a job to do.”

“Job?” Bruce said as he trembled in Natasha’s care.

“Yeah,” Clint answered. The soul lines pitched and synchronized as his purpose clarified. "The dead have awakened.”

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Chapter End Notes

I have relatives visiting for the next few weeks so getting time to revise is going to be nearly impossible. I hope to get the next chapter up (at the latest) 6 August! Sorry for the delay.
If you haven't noticed I also added a chapter because I realized the last chapter needed to be split into two for clarity's sake. Hope you like it!
CHAPTER 14

The dead indeed. Standing in the middle of the Barton kitchen Nick Fury managed to glare at them through the shades of his sunglasses. Tony wanted to act surprised, but the idea that Nick Fury survived multiple gunshot wounds and haunted the shadows and alleyways failed to move him at all. Glancing at Steve, Tony noted that dear old Cap wasn’t any more surprised than Nat or Sam. Thor had no idea that Fury was supposed to have kicked the bucket and greeted him with a hearty handshake and smack to the shoulder. Bruce stared wide-eyed at Fury like he might turn tail and run or at the very least turn into the Hulk and pout out by the apple orchard to the back of the barn.

It took Tony several more seconds before he saw Hill standing to the side near the dining area with that concentrated look she often got on her face before spouting out bad news like a TV news anchor. “This doesn’t look promising,” Tony muttered as Steve helped him to sit in one of the dining room chairs. Steve clasped his shoulder and then moved off to the kitchen to get him some water. Rubbing his chest, Tony cringed at the feel of the burn.

Without looking back at him, Steve said, “Don’t touch it, Tony. You’ll get it infected.”

“I see you’ve been keeping busy,” Fury said. His arms crossed over his chest. He wore a thick hand knit dark maroon sweater and jeans. Part of Tony rebelled at the sight of seeing Fury in civilian type clothes and not looking like a part of the underworld.

“Busy enough,” Steve said, but turned to Laura. “Do you have anything for burns?”

She smiled, nodded, and then left the room. Fury weighed his gaze at each of them before settling on Steve.

“Looks like you’ve been practicing.”

“Something like that,” Steve said but to Tony seemed stiff, shut, as if he faced an inquisition.

Fury looked closed off as well like he’d spent the last weeks beaten and bruised. Overall, he seemed fine for a man that was supposed to be dead. “Looking good for a dead man,” Tony remarked and Clint only smirked.

“I went looking for Hydra cells. SHIELD had clandestine stations all over the world. Some of them are the good guys,” he said with a shrug. “Some of them not so good.”

Laura returned with a first aid kit and then rounded up the children who had been hanging on the bannister of the staircase trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. She shared a look with Clint and
then brought their children upstairs much to their whispered protests. Steve waited until they left and then gathered up the supplies. He came and sat next to Tony and gestured for him to lift up his tattered shirt.

“I don’t need to-.” Tony said but Steve only growled while Bruce joined them. It was then that Tony felt the heat in his mark and that he glimpsed that both Bruce’s and Steve’s soul marks pulsed a red beat.

“Let me,” Bruce said, and Steve moved aside, standing up so that Bruce could take his place. He never left Tony’s side.

“What can we do for you, Nick?” Steve had his arms folded over his chest, his shield on his back. He was ready, alert, and spirited in a way that Tony had never seen before in his interactions with Fury.

“Well, the most recent cell I found I think you’ll be interested in,” Fury replied and then nodded to Hill.

Dressed as casually as Fury in jeans and a leather jacket, she pulled a tablet out of the messenger bag she held, turned it on with a swipe, and then with a few taps handed it to Steve. Tony tried to sit up and see what was on the screen, but Bruce batted him down and continued to clean the burns on his chest. Thankfully they looked like they were only first degree.

“Remember the twins?” Hill asked. “Well, it looks like they were part of an experiment in Sokovia. It’s a small eastern European country that’s always been in the crosshairs of history. In other words, more powerful countries use it as their dumping grounds.”

“Lots of wars in and around Sokovia,” Natasha said and stood next to Steve to examine the tablet. “It was the victim of proxy wars repeatedly.” Tony studied her body language; Natasha was rarely a person easy to read, but he could tell she had a history with this one.

“Yes, well, not all of them turned out well,” Hill said and hit the screen again. “When SHIELD walked in and promised the country aid if they could set up a base, the corrupt government went for it.”

“But it wasn’t SHIELD. It was Hydra,” Steve said and sighed. The tension in his shoulders and back increased and Tony reached over and touched his arm. Hill noted his action with a raised brow but kept up the impromptu briefing.

“Yes, Hydra. They started experiments. A lot of people started to go missing. It seems as if the Maximoff twins volunteered. They wanted to ensure that no more of their countrymen were abducted.”

“So, they went ahead and volunteered?” Tony asked. “To stop what was happening to others?”

“Yeah, we heard a little of this before,” Steve said. “So, what does that mean? They’re still in the operation. Part of Hydra?”

“We know where the cell is finally.” Fury eyed each one of them. “And we’re pretty sure the Hydra cell there has Loki’s scepter. We’ve been tracking it down and finally stumbled across some rumors that led us back around to the twins and then to Sokovia.”

“We have to go in and get it,” Natasha stated. There was no question in her voice.

“We also have to get them,” Steve replied. “They’re part of the pack.”
Fury pushed off from the counter he leaned against and said, “You’re not wrong, Cap. Intel says that these two have been manipulated from the get-go. They think they are part of SHIELD.”

“Brainwashed?” Clint asked, and Tony could literally see his hackles rise. Bruce stopped dabbing the burn on his chest.

“With the scepter in play, we have to assume so,” Fury confirmed. “Plus remember, their country’s been preyed upon not only by Hydra but by a corrupt and dictatorial government. They went to von Strucker as -.”

“Lambs to the slaughter,” Tony filled in. He gestured to Bruce that he was fine and stood up as he pulled the remains of his shirt down. “What are we facing when you say they’ve been manipulated? Can we get through to them?”

“Not sure,” Fury said and then he crossed his arms. “On top of that von Strucker has someone, an enemy, already sniffing around the cell that’s dangerous and could put our operation in jeopardy.”

“More Hydra cells in play? Maybe a power play?” Steve asked as Tony sidled up to him. Just being near Steve right now soothed the sting of his injury.

“Yes and no,” Fury said. He focused on Steve. “Look, there’s no easy way to say this, but it’s Barnes. He fell off the radar for a long time, but now he’s in Sokovia. We don’t know if he’s cleaning house of Hydra or if he’s -.”

“He’s pack, too,” Steve interjected. He handed the tablet back to Hill. Now it was his turn to close off with arms over his chest. “He could be lured by the twins either for good or-.”

“Not so good,” Clint said. “We gotta go.”

Thor had been quiet during the exchange and Tony glanced at him. His brow furrowed in thought. “Thor? What’s the good word?”

“I fear what plans this Hydra agent has for the scepter. It is known to have great influence over the mind. There are even rumors.” Thor stopped, quieted by his own distracted thoughts before he began again. “The scepter may hold a stone, one of great significance much like the Tesseract or the aether. If they have the scepter, then there is no question we must find a way to retrieve it.”

“Then we do this,” Steve said. He nodded more to himself than to anyone of them. The soul pack’s bonds vibrated, and Tony felt a slight murmuring like an echo from Steve. Each member’s bond aligned with Steve’s core. Tony’s own core bolstered Steve’s astral projection as his soul strengthened and reinforced it. “We’re not jumping in without a plan.” He turned to Hill. “What intel do we have? Location, the buildings, the security.”

“We have some.” Hill referenced her tablet, but Tony jumped in and stopped her.

“Give it here. Send me the data,” Tony said and then peered over his shoulder at the staircase where he glimpsed the shadows of the Barton kids, waiting. “What say you go and find me one of the Iron Legion heads?” Both Cooper and Lila leapt to their feet and raced down the stairs thundering out of the house before either Clint or Laura could object. Tony shrugged. “Kids.”

While Hill sent the encrypted data to him, Tony checked his phone and then issued a command to JARVIS. “This will be simple enough once we get one of the Legion heads.”

“Tony?” Steve asked. The tension he held in his shoulders shifted through the bonds. The energy wave frequency grew more rapid, stronger.
“Don’t worry,” Tony said. “I got an idea to help this along.” When Cooper and Lila returned with a handful of robot heads, Tony grinned. “Give her here.” They dropped their loot on the dining room table much to Laura’s chagrin, but she didn’t protest. Instead she marched the children back upstairs. He watched them go and then said, “I guess I’m going to owe them an apology.”

Clint replied, “Depends. Now show us.”

With a little finagling, Tony set one of the robot heads on the table with the neck pointed upward. “This should work.” He punched in a few commands on his phone while mentally wishing for his tablet. Some things he could tell JARVIS to do, but others he needed to manipulate. It took a few tries but then the accessed data glimmered and shone above the dining room table projected from the skull of a dead robot. Tony reached over the head and spun the lay out of the woods surrounding an old castle. He enlarged it by splaying his hands out. “Here we go.”

“Now, that’s impressive,” Sam said and knocked Steve in the arm with an elbow. Tony noticed the slight blush of pink to Steve’s cheeks.

Tony suppressed a smile. He couldn’t deny that the idea that Steve might be proud of him made him feel good, and maybe a little smug. A slight rebuke popped through the bond and Tony glanced over to Steve who only arched a brow at him.

Clearing his throat, Tony said, “Anyway. This is the lay-out of the surrounding areas.”

Fury stepped up to the display. “According to the intel, it looks like it is heavily guarded.”

Over the next hour, the team went through the details of the data and intel. Tony worked on setting up all of the robot heads to display the different categories of the data. Maps, guard read outs and schematics floated above the table. In addition, Hill supplied more information on the twins, and it looked grimmer and grimmer. Their home had been bombed and their parents died in front of them. The weapons? Stark made. The revelation crashed into Tony like a brick in the face. He hadn’t expected that especially since he’d been out of the weapon manufacturing business for years. The fact remained though that within the last decade Stark Industries had sold weapons of mass destruction that were used in altercations all over the world. How much more was he and his company responsible for? Bile bubbled up in the back of his throat and for a second the projected plans before him blurred as he tried to blink the tears away.

Tony recalled Steve defending the Maximoffs. saying how when the bond snapped into place and they connected, Steve felt an estrangement from the young woman of desolation and loss. It came down to the fact that Stark’s weapons led to their parents’ death. He might not be directly responsible for the deaths, but somehow, he still felt the pain. He excused himself and slipped out before Steve could call him back. He walked down the steps of the back porch and wandered toward the fields.

“And where are you going, Friend Tony?”

Thor. Why would Thor of all people follow him? They didn’t even have anything in common. In fact, he’s not certain he actually talked to the demi-god one on one ever. He probably spoke more to his crazed, adopted brother than he ever did with Thor. Tony stopped and turned around to watch as Thor crossed the distance between them.

Most of the time, Thor wore his armor sans cape. Yet on the farm, he’d taken to wearing civilian clothes, even when they were playing war games. Usually during their training exercises, Thor wore his chainmail over his civilian clothes. It felt all wrong and out of place, like someone decided to dress up a golden retriever. Still, Thor seemed comfortable in the two sizes too small plaid shirt and the torn jeans. He’d tied back his hair, though a few strands fell free around his face.
“I just needed some air.”

“You needed more than air,” Thor said. He joined Tony and then gestured to the path along the fields toward the fenced paddock. Tony fell into step easily with him. “I fear you may be losing your path.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Tony peered over his shoulder at the house. It was a home, a place of comfort and memories. He wondered if he would ever get that – if he ever wanted it. Maybe – once with Pepper- but now that felt a million miles away.

“You are wondering if you belong, if you are good enough,” Thor said. “I feel this through the bond. Don’t be surprised if our good Captain feels it as well.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Tony said again, but still he tasted the bitterness of truth. For so many years he defined himself as successful through his machinations of war. The fact that he hadn’t waged the war had no bearing on the fact that he profited from it gleefully. His conscience had finally caught up with him when his own bomb blew up in his face and led him down the path of redemption. Yet he failed to remember that the path he walked remained fraught with barbs of the past. “I remember that war, you know.” He reached out and plucked a leaf from the corn stalk beyond the fencing. “I remember it. Just before I went to Afghanistan, when the arc reactor and Iron Man all happened.” He added the latter because he didn’t know how much background Thor had learned about him. “I saw the war on television, brushed it off when I looked at the sales report that we were supplying some of the sides. Hell, all of the sides.” He threw the leaf down. “You know.” He looked at Thor. “When you realize that you’re a shit it hurts, but you try and change. Really change. But then your past keeps coming back to haunt you.”

Thor squinted into the last of the sun. He placed his hands at his waist and nodded. “I know a little of what you speak. My father cast me out when I advocated war and broke a peace he had negotiated with one of our dire enemies. Cast out, without my powers. I found my way on Midgard. I was lucky he sent me here. You are lucky as well. You found your way through your Iron Man, is that not true?”

Tony wanted to agree, but still he recalled how he floundered. How the arc reactor nearly killed him, how he ruined his relationship with Pepper. Right now, all he had was the soul pack. “I can’t do this to him.”

“To whom?”

“To Steve.” There, the truth laid bare, naked yet at the same time too potent. “He believes in me. What’s going to happen when those two, the twins, tell him that the reason their family is dead, the reason that their country is wrecked, the reason they went to SHIELD or Hydra, whatever. The reason they were captured is because of me.” Tony scratched at his hair, wanted to tug it out. “Hell, I want to hate Barnes. He killed my parents, but I killed their parents.”

“You did nothing of the sort,” Thor said. He grimaced as he felt the strings of Tony’s discomfiture. “I would say I am complacent in my brother’s deeds. I was the one who never noted his jealousy of my position. I pretended that his actions as a youth were mere playful antics. But they were not. I should have read the signs. Neither my father nor my mother read the signs. Yet still it happened. I mourn his death now because of the loss of what could have been. Am I guilty of his deeds? No. Will I ensure I keep an open eye in the future? Yes.” He paused and kept his sights on Tony. “Perhaps now you see the weaknesses and frailty of us all?”

Tony remained mum. The pressure of his choices, of what happened in the past, weighed on his shoulders, though he never felt like Atlas but more like Sisyphus. The burden of his past was only a
rock on his shoulders that he trudged up a hill over and over only to have it roll back down again.

“You need to speak with our good Captain. Tell him your fears. I can only guide you, but I cannot do it for you,” Thor said and then he nodded once before he left Tony to his own thoughts by the corner of the property.

Tony watched him leave and envied him for falling so easily into his role as guide. How long had it been since Thor joined their pack and already he naturally offered advice and guidance like a pro, and here was Tony scratching his way through the dirt, trying to eek out a way to be Beloved. Still he couldn’t fathom what it meant. How it worked.

“Hey.”

Tony cringed but turned around to greet Steve with a smile plastered on his face. “Hey yourself.”

“I missed you in there.” Steve joined Tony at the fence line and glanced out at the fields, the trees beyond and the rolling hills. “Could you do this? Could you consider just leaving it all and doing this – like Clint?”

Tony spotted the marks all up and down Steve’s arm. So many lives were linked to his, a man who woke up in a century where he had no one but was now responsible for so many people. He circled back to Steve’s question – give it all up and just retire. “I don’t know. Could you?”

Steve frowned and a worried look that bordered on loss cross his face. “Don’t know what I would do with myself. You know, Sam once asked me if I wanted to get out of SHIELD, what would I do.” Steve shook his shoulders in a partial shrug. “I didn’t know then. I sure as hell don’t know now. Feel like I’m just embarking on something real though.” He reached out his hand and captured Tony’s wrist. He grazed a touch over Tony’s soul mark. “What is it?”

Tony looked back at the farmhouse where Thor had escaped to and said, “Sokovia, the twins, their parents – they were killed by my bombs. Stark Industries bombs.”

Steve stayed silent. His soft expression never changed though.

“It was ten years ago. I was a different man, or at least I hope I’m different now. I don’t make bombs anymore.”

“No, no you don’t,” Steve said. “But you still feel guilty.”

“Every damned day,” Tony said and wanted to throw out the words, throw out the guilt.

Steve tightened his grasp. “You’re not the only one. I think about Bucky falling, about how he took up the shield and tried to protect me. What did he get for it? Seventy years of torture and being forced to be an assassin for Hydra. Hydra, an enemy we both fought. It was our mission.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Tony said.

“Nat said the same thing,” Steve said with a half-smile that didn’t touch his eyes. “But the truth is we can never really get rid of irrational guilt, can we?”

“No,” Tony said as he looked down at their hands entangled. “No, we can’t. It’s hard enough to deal with our anger.”

“Yeah,” Steve whispered, and Tony heard the crack in his voice at the same time that the reverberations from his soul wavered. “I have to save him, Tony. You know that, right?”
“I know it,” Tony said. “I understand it. Mentally, I get it. But emotionally—.” He swallowed down his pain but knew that Steve could read it through the bond. “I just keep thinking about my mom. How he killed her. How did he do it? Did she know, did she look into the eyes of her killer? It looked like an accident – but when you go through the autopsy reports.” He stopped because he never confessed to reading them, to going through the encrypted data dump from SHIELD. It took no time at all to find it. “God, I know she did. He strangled her.”

The grief pulsed through the bond and Tony read it, though the complexity confused him until he realized that Steve’s sorrow grew from his love for Bucky as well as his love for Tony. Steve said in a low voice, “You don’t have to come with us. If you need to sit this one out, we can deal. Somehow. Maybe we could call your friend in the air force in. But right now, I have to do this. Once we get him, I’ll bring him somewhere else. I’m sure that Fury and Nat know of safe houses where we can go.”

“Alone? You’re going to be with him alone?” Tony tugged his hand away. “No. I can’t! I can’t even believe you would think that – that I would leave you to him alone.”

“He’s not going to hurt me.”

“Fuck, he already tried to kill you,” Tony spat back. “No, you are not doing that. I won’t allow it.”

Steve raised an eyebrow and seemed more amused than insulted. “Really? You won’t allow it? Come on.”

The amusement riled Tony even further. “What the hell? No, you’re bonded now. To me, to all of us, you can’t throw your life away like that anymore. You can’t pilot planes into the ocean or even take on Hydra all by yourself – and I don’t care that you had Nat and Sam. Sam was new to all of this and Nat was injured if I remember correctly. No, you don’t get to do this without the pack’s okay.”

Steve screwed up his mouth and Tony couldn’t tell whether or not he was laughing or quelling his anger. The feedback through the bond mixed and oscillated in all directions. “Okay,” Steve said after a pause. “I get it. But I am not leaving him out there. He’s pack and I understand the issue you have. I can’t let him wander without anyone caring for him. He needs someone to care.”

“And it has to be you,” Tony said with resignation. He understood where Steve was coming from even if he couldn’t find his way over to common ground. “We could look for a neutral party. Someone who could help? Maybe even Bruce would be amenable to helping too, since he’s Healer.”

“And volatile like Bucky.”

Tony squeezed Steve’s hand. “I didn’t say the plan was perfect, but if we could find a neutral party you could trust?”

“I’ll think about it.” Steve released a breath and then surveyed the area around him. “Do you think we’ll ever retire?”

Tony studied him – but the bond told him more – a longing, a yearning that ached for peace. “You’ve been fighting all your life.” Steve didn’t reply only gave him a half frown. “We’ll find a way, don’t worry.” He didn’t know if he was promising Steve a way to bring Bucky into the fold, a way to retire, or, hell, a way to build a farmhouse in the middle of butt fuck nowhere. What he did know is that somehow, he could promise it all, even Bucky. For Steve, he would promise anything. He would give anything for Steve.
“Let’s go back inside,” Steve said. “You’re injured. I want to take care of you.”

Tony chuckled. “That is not sexy, you know.”

“I didn’t mean it to be,” Steve said but he never let go of Tony’s hand.

The rest of the evening consisted of working out strategies, operations, tactics, and finally getting a list together of all the supplies needed. While Clint, Natasha, and Hill worked on that, Tony sent notice to JARVIS to get the cleaning crew out to the farm to collect all the Legion robot pieces. He still wasn’t happy about Hulk’s tendency to smash things, but he had to admit their war games helped coalesce not only the team but also the pack. Though he didn’t really know the difference. Once he was assured that the Iron Legion would be in safe hands, Tony joined the team for dinner. Steve sat quietly next to him. Both mentally and emotionally Steve emitted a reserved demeanor.

Steve volunteered to clean up and the rest of the team slowly exited to sit by the fire pit to relax in the haze of the late summer twilight. Tony lingered at the edge of the kitchen watching as Steve quietly washed the dishes, foregoing even cracking about the dishwasher open.

“What’s going on?” Tony asked, arms crossed tightly over his chest. The sting of the burns had faded but the heat of the soul mark remained.

“Just thinking. Needed some space.”

“The Mantra?” Tony heard the whisper of it in his head, the cadence offered a certain peace.

“Kind of,” Steve said. “Need to clear my head. Lots of conflicting thoughts, emotions.”

“I’m part of that, I’m sure,” Tony replied and stepped closer. “This is going to be difficult for us no matter what we promise or what we say.” Steve didn’t immediately answer. Instead he focused on scrubbing the pot in the sink. The muscles of his bicep worked as he cleared away the burnt food. His concentration drew Tony to his side. He placed a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “What’d that pot ever do to you?”

Steve screwed up his mouth but continued his battle with the cooked-on cheese. “I just want you to know, Tony, that I realize how hard this is going to be for you.”

“I know you do,” Tony replied. The very last thing he wanted right now was to lose everything they’d started to build. He never thought they would get this far. The moment that Steve told him about Bucky and his parents remained in sharp relief in Tony’s memories. Sometimes it was hard to get around when he thought of the pack, its members, and his future.

“I’m going to take him to the cabin, that one Strange sent us,” Steve said. “I’m gonna ask Strange to send us there. Maybe ask Wong to come along. Might take some time before we come back. I need to see if I can help him.” He never looked away from the pot but scoured at it like it fought back.

They’d already talked about this before dinner and now Steve spun back to the same place again. Tony took a count of three. He pulled away, not touching Steve anymore, slipping a space between their souls. “Let me get this straight. You’re going to take someone who used to be assassin, who might just be insane, and bring him to a cabin in the middle of nowhere and use what? Your Captain America voice to get him back?”

Steve dropped the scrubber and hung his head. He waited a moment and through their link, Tony sensed that Steve worked at stilling his temper. In and of itself, that surprised Tony.

“No. I’m going to do what needs to be done. He needs to know I’m there for him. I can do this-.”
“Alone. Without your pack, without your Healer?” Tony asked. Again, Steve kept falling into the same trap in his head. But, then again, Tony knew how that was. He often fell into the same anxieties and fears over and again. Tony admitted that he separated his soul from Steve – as much as he could – but at the same time he wanted to encircle Steve with his soul, with his arms. He felt the fear, the uncertainty. He understood a lot of that. Hell, he just wanted to run because of his part in what was going on in Sokovia, but the truth was they needed to see the bigger picture. Thor was right about understanding who and what they were.

“He needs me, Tony,” Steve said but he still hadn’t looked at him. He gripped the counter and shook his head. “I’ve done the ground work. I started to try and reach out to him, give him a way home.”

Tony recalled Steve doing something similar to that after the train crash. Instead of continuing a confrontational avenue to discuss Barnes, Tony went another way. “So, you know him, right? What do you think he’s doing there? Is he there to exact vengeance on Hydra? Or is he there looking for a handler? Looking for his masters?”

“If it’s Bucky, truly Bucky and not the Winter Soldier, he’s not there for any of those options,” Steve said and picked up the dish towel to dry his hands. “He’s there to help.”

“Help who? And why?” Tony crossed his arms over his chest, fully aware that he closed himself off both physically and through their soul bond, but sometimes it was necessary.

“The twins,” Steve said and waited as if Tony should come to the same logical conclusion. When Tony stood there staring blankly at him, Steve relented. “Bucky must be in Europe. Don’t ask me how he got there but I’m getting a kind of old familiarity from him. Like he knows the places he’s hanging out, like he’s trying to find himself through walking places in his past.” He shrugged. “I’m not sure. But that’s what I’m getting. I think he feels the twins, more so than he does us. They’re on the same wavelength as he is. Fashioned by Hydra, but not bad. They aren’t bad people. I think he’s there to get them out. Same as us.”

A scoff erupted out of Tony. He muffled it as quickly as he could, but the damage had already been done. He held up his hands to stop Steve’s disgusted reaction. “No, please.” He gestured for Steve to continue, though his disbelief mounted.

“We know that they’re being coerced. That Hydra acted as SHIELD, and that they are now virtual prisoners of this rogue Hydra cell,” Steve said and tossed the dish towel to the counter. “Bucky is there to help them, I’m sure of it. Don’t tell me you don’t feel his need to do something.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m not so in tune with the family assassin,” Tony snapped back and instantly regretted. His emotions concerning Bucky were all over the place, and for once it would be nice if Steve gave him a little breathing room and offer him the space he needed to process.

Steve put his hands on his hips, nodded a few times, and then said, “Fine. Fine. Tell the team, I’m going to bed. We should finish getting our supplies tomorrow. We ship out on Friday.”

Tony should have said something, should have stopped him, but instead he dropped into one of the kitchen chairs and stared into the darkness outside where Steve had escaped to their barn loft. What the hell was Tony doing? Sabotaging the one good thing that happened to him in the last six months, that was what. He teased at it, had to taunt Steve. Why? Thor’s words came back to Tony, reminding him of his own frailty. He glanced toward the fire pit where the rest of the team huddled together. They would leave this sanctuary and emerge more than a team. They had evolved into a pack here. He felt their presence and it didn’t invade anymore but surrounded and comforted. The idea of it ever being taken from him terrified him. The thought of losing Steve – his love if that’s what it genuinely was – broke him. He couldn’t let it happen.
He went to the barn, giving only a quick wave to his pack mates before finding his way through the darkness up to the loft. He stopped at the door, wondering if he would be welcome. The tiny lantern near the side of the bed flickered with its electric light trying to emulate a candle. It barely offered enough light to brighten a 5 inch radius. Steve’s face lay in shadow on the pull-out bed, so Tony couldn’t discern if he was awake.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said and hadn’t even realized he’d been thinking it.

“So am I,” Steve whispered. “For so long, I’ve been trying to do the right thing. I told Peggy that once. She said I was dramatic. But it’s true. I’ve been trying to do the right thing, and I still want to, but you have to understand I want to save him. I have to save him.”

Tony crossed the small space to the bed and sat down, his back to Steve. “I get that. I understand that. But-.” He cringed and closed his eyes. “I can’t lose you when you do this. I can’t.”

Steve’s hand found Tony’s hip and settled there. “Who said you’re going to lose me? That’s not going to happen. I can’t let that happen. You’re too important to me.”

Tony twisted around and said, “Yeah?”

Steve captured Tony’s hand. “Yeah, now come to bed.”

“It’s early yet.”

In the dim light, Tony caught Steve’s smile. “Yeah, it is.”

Maybe that night Tony admitted to himself that barriers in souls exist, but those same walls have doors that open, welcoming and loving all the same. The next morning as he awoke, Tony stayed quiet in Steve’s arms, trying to will the day to stop. What they would face still hung over them like an anvil waiting to drop. Strucker presented an enigma, secured in his fortress in a distant country with little consequence to the world. But the work he must have done there, that changed the Maximoff twins, beckoned and warned the rest of the world. Things were not as they seemed, not always.

Strucker not only headed up a secret Hydra base, but Loki’s scepter found its way into the man’s hands. As they prepared to board the Quin Jet and fly to Sokovia, Tony watched as Steve went through the pre-flight review of the knowns and variables to the battle plan. He had a holographic map floating in the midst of the Jet. He spun it around and studied it. Natasha and Maria stood beside him.

“It’s well fortified. Outposts here, here, and here. Nothing on this ridge as far as we can tell, but the mountain isn’t scalable so that might not be a way to go,” Maria said.

Steve considered the landscape as Tony watched from the side. “They have guard towers in tandem. That means once one knows we’re there, the whole line will.”

“Dominos ready to drop,” Maria agreed.

“The base is actually a fortress,” Natasha said as she pointed to it on the map. “Might have more than just low-tech defenses.”

“That’s where Iron Man comes in,” Steve said and looked up at Tony from the battle hologram before him. “We’ll need you to get a lay of the land, find out the defenses.”

“And who’s carting your ass in?” Tony asked.
“I’m army and I’m on the ground. We have air defenses of Falcon, Thor, and you. That’s good enough for me.”

“The only question is,” Natasha said. “Are we going in to neutralize the Hydra base or are we going in to get out pack mates?”

Tony narrowed his focus on Steve as the vibrations along the soul bonds intensified. Steve pressed his lips into a tight line but then bobbed his head. “I know the mission is the scepter, but we also go in and try and get the twins as well as Bucky.”

“This is going to throw you off,” Natasha said, not mincing words. “We need your head in the game. If you can’t do this-.”

Steve swiped the hologram away with one arm and then pulled on his fingerless gloves. “I did it before on the Helicarrier. Don’t think I can’t do it here.” He closed the conversation off and both Maria and Natasha shared a look before considering Tony. He put his hands up as Steve walked to the front of the Quin Jet. Tony followed him.

“Are you going to be able to do this?” Tony asked.

“When am I not able -.”

“You don’t get to do that,” Tony stopped him. “Seriously, think about it.”

Steve held onto the frame of the jet as the supplies were loaded. He stared out into the fields around them. “You know, Clint has a family and now he has this pack to deal with. And in a way it’s his extended family. We’re all family in the pack. Our job is Avengers, but the pack, that’s personal.”

“And that’s what I mean,” Tony said. “If I’m having misgivings about it then you, you have to be.”

“No, I don’t,” Steve said, and Tony felt the truth of his statement ring through the bonds. “I know this is the right thing to do.”

“God, I don’t know if you’re just obstinately stupid or stupidly arrogant, but that’s how you get people dead,” Tony said. He didn’t know why, maybe it was the promises they made last night, or maybe it was that this morning had to come, but he really needed Steve to listen.

“No, no one’s going to die today,” Steve said, and, with that, he closed off the conversation as well as his soul. Tony practically felt the bricks and mortar being slapped together around Steve as he fortified his inner core with the Soul Mantra. Tony almost called him on it, almost but then Sam walked over to him and gestured to Tony with a slight lift of his chin.

“Leave it for now,” Sam said. “It’s not something you’re going to change his mind about.”

“Is this advice from the Companion?” Tony asked.

Sam frowned and then said, “No.” He elongated the o. “Not at all. It’s advice from someone’s whose been there, done that.” Sam glanced at Steve who had walked up further to the front of the jet as the final flight checks were initialized. “He’s going after them regardless of what you say. Just watch out for him. That’s your job.”

“My job?”

“That’s the advice from the Companion.”
The engines screamed to life and then their conversation ended. Tony heard Steve talking into the comm-link. “Meet at the rendezvous point in three hours. We take Strucker tonight.”

“Night time ambush,” Tony muttered.

“Lucky they’ve got our eyes in the sky,” Sam said.

Tony didn’t speak again to Steve during the flight. He should have. He admitted that much to himself, but sometimes he could be as pigheaded as the next guy. When they approached the rendezvous point, Tony glanced over at Steve near the front of the jet and sighed. He reached out then, just a slight brush, a caress of his soul against Steve’s, and felt a shudder in response. Steve met his gaze and smiled. They might not always agree, but the bond remained.

In seconds, though, Steve transformed into not only the leader of their pack, but into the leader of the Avengers – Captain America. “Fury is meeting us with another Quin Jet. We have a jeep and a cycle. Nat and Clint will be in the jeep, I’ll take the cycle. I want full sight of the ground layout by our airborne contingent. Get us real time data and have JARVIS feed it back to the ground. Hill and Fury will stay back and send us updates. Sorry, Bruce, but we need Hulk full out here.”

“I’ll be there, don’t worry,” Natasha said, and Bruce cringed but agreed.

Everything went as expected – until it didn’t. As Tony disabled the shields around the Hydra fortress, he heard yelps of surprise and an anguished cry of pain through the comm-link. Before he even had to ask who was down, the soul bond tightened, focused, and he knew – Clint. “Shit.”

“Tony?” Steve said over the comm-link. “Clint’s down. Nat’s taking over his position. I called in Fury and Maria to evac him.”

“Are we still in play?” Tony asked and then he saw it – in the courtyard of the fortress. The girl and her brother with someone else –someone fighting tooth and nail against the Hydra forces. “’Cause I have eyes on Family and I think Brother.”

A shock wave burst through the bond.

“Steve?” Sam called out.

“You must go to them,” Thor added. “The shields are down. Your air defense will cover you.”

“Nat?” Steve asked over the lines but he didn’t need an answer – she returned calming waves that signaled she and Clint were well in hand with their backup. “Move on the base!”

Tony streaked down like a bullet out of the sky. Lightning crackled, and thunder rolled across the night as Thor flew past him. From the balustrade of the fortress gunfire blasted through the air.

“Heads up, Falcon,” Tony yelled since he was the most vulnerable of their air support.

“Watching out!” Sam replied, and he hung farther up in the sky taking out the enemy targets like ducks in a pond.

Tony rounded up the status of all of the team members through JARVIS. Both Natasha and Clint were out of the game currently, but they were safely with Fury and Hill. Clint would be evacuated but they needed Natasha back, just in case they had a hard time putting the genie back in the bottle when it came to Hulk. Steve and Hulk were literally smashing their way through the ground defenses and would climb the hill to the fortress any minute. Just as Tony thought it, the echo through the bonds alerted him and he spun around in the air to see Hulk lifting Steve up like a doll and bounding
up the mountain side. That just about knocked Tony out of the air, but he swallowed down the bile in his throat and buzzed toward their entry point in order to clear the perimeter.

“Securing perimeter for entrance. Thor and Falcon follow the wayward pack members,” Tony said and blasted off a round of rockets and repulsor fire toward the gates to open them for Steve.

Yet Steve came through the comm-link as his soul snapped back at Tony. “Stay in your position – get to the pack members.”

Tony seethed. “You need help!”

“I have the Hulk – get back in position, Iron Man!” Steve focused back on the Hulk as Tony hovered in the air for the moment. His worries were unjustified as Big Green literally pounded his way past the sentries and cracked open the fortress like an eggshell.

With one last glance at Steve, Tony shot over the stone fortress that looked like something out of the Middle Ages and zeroed in on their wayward pack members. He should be searching for the scepter, not rounding up their lost members. He grimaced as he watched a contingent of von Strucker’s gang converge on the twins and Bucky. Should he call him Bucky or was he watching the Winter Soldier in action? Something bitter and vile bit at the back of his throat.

“Iron Man?” Thor called through the link and Tony realized he’d ended up hovering over the action instead of doing something about it. In response, he drove in, flashing past the battlements toward the center where the twins and Brother ducked away from the barrage of gunfire. The young man with shockingly white hair gripped his sister and bolted toward the side armaments. Tony gaped as the young woman raised her hands and fire energy swirled and then burst out like a shock wave, hitting the guards in their way and neutralizing them.

Powerful. Deadly. How could they possibly bring her into the pack when she’d been tutored by Hydra itself? And then Tony’s focus went to Bucky – Brother – his brother in the pack and now part of his family. A man who killed his mother by strangling her. He had Bucky in his sights, just meters away as he swooped down to intervene with the battle in the bailey of the fortress. He could literally blow the man to hell. His nerves fired, and his brain ached. In the near distance he heard JARVIS calling him, trying to yank him out of his fugue. Nothing could. The visions came to him, filtering from the bond itself, as if he tapped into a subconscious part of Bucky’s brain and relived the memories. Felt Bucky’s flesh hand wrap around his mother’s neck, the delicate bones snapping under pressure of his fingers even as she cried.

She cried!

Tony swallowed down the need to vomit and then swung downward in front of his enemy. The pain and memories blinded him as he slammed down in front of them – Hydra. The oncoming guards meant nothing to him as he raised the repulsors.

“No!” the young woman screamed and then her brother whizzed toward Tony in a blur of white and blue. He knocked Tony off balance as Bucky aimed the rifle not at the Hydra guards pursuing them, but at Tony’s head.

A pitched cry shuddered through the bond, but Tony couldn’t discern its origin. Even as he heard the click of the rifle the sky around them flashed with lightning and thunder roared. A blast of red fire hit the Hydra goons and Bucky was momentarily caught off guard. The twins circled one another both taking out the guards and keeping Tony at bay. The leak of the memories assaulted Tony again, and he stumbled back, getting in front of Bucky. The memories of all the deaths, the looks of fear, the intensity of murder. It bled through the bonds as if Barnes gushed from wounds deep and deadly.
“Do you even remember my parents? You killed them. You strangled my mother. You son of a bitch!” Tears ran down his cheeks and he opened the faceplate and the helmet folded down. He wanted to look the killer of his mother in the eyes. “You don’t even know me. How could you even remember them?”

Yet. The moments before their deaths, before Howard and Maria met the Winter Soldier, clicked into Tony’s mind as if he’d simply pressed a button. He saw Howard’s blood, heard the pleading in his voice, saw him reached up to a cold-hearted killer. But the worst of it, the horror of it was when he experienced the crushing of the bones of his mother’s trachea.

His mother.

His fingers wrapped around her throat as the terror shivered through her. Her trembling – he fucking felt it – the bond telegraphed the memory to him. The sensory overload made him gag. He knew every cursed moment of the last breaths of his mother.

His mother. He felt her die in his own hands. The soul bond picked out the link between Barnes and Tony and amplified it, shared it.

He felt his mother’s death with his own finger tips as if he’d done it himself.

“You bastard!” Tony screamed.

“Tony? Tony?”

The words were distant and frightened. Some part of his brain knew that Steve called out to him, begged him to hear. Some part of him felt the bonds – the Beloved bond – snap taut and vibrate with energy. He ignored it because there was a hole in his chest a mile wide and his life poured out and died again as if he was seventeen and learning his parents were gone.

He couldn’t see as the tears blinded him; he couldn’t breathe as the weeping blocked the air from his lungs. “What did you do? You god damned fucking bastard!”

“Tony!” Steve called. “Someone get to Tony’s position. Please! Someone!”

Through the trauma’s haze, the bonds sang out to him from all of the team members of the pack. Rain poured down as Thor tried to stop him from his position above the fortress. There was no way for Thor to join them since Hydra forces still attacked and he kept them at bay. Part of Tony knew he needed to focus on the task at hand, but every wound leaking through the bonds from Barnes tore apart his soul.

“No, no,” Tony muttered and then raised his hands to Barnes who had once again brought the rifle to bear. Tony couldn’t deny the look of dread, of mourning, of isolation in Barnes’ expression. Yet, the echo of his mother’s death beat through the bond like an everlasting curse. He activated the repulsors. “You killed her.”

As the rain spattered the muddy ground, the pain ached through the bond between Tony and Barnes. He didn’t know whether or not the pain originated from his own heart or from the man standing in front of him. The assault rifle in his metal hand never wavered as he protected the twins but at the same time threatened Tony. The torment in Barnes’ eyes flashed through the bond and Tony steeled himself to strike.

“No.” Why he said it, Tony couldn’t fathom or explain. He heard in the distance a voice ringing in his head, begging him, pleading with him. He aimed the repulsor but even as he debated a blur of motion swept by him. In milliseconds, the girl and her brother were standing next to him, her hands
upraised and red energy crackling between them. He wanted to yell at her, to cry out, but then the world flashed crimson and he dropped away.

Yet, he never lost consciousness. He opened his eyes to a world dark and muddy. The fortress disappeared and above him a hole in space pulsed violet. Swarms of ships like the ones from the Chitauri attack on New York bled through the wound in the Earth’s sky. It never drew his attention, because the pain in his chest crippled him, dropped him to his knees. The pain brightened the world, but not with joy, with a horrifying, scorching agony. All the bonds were gone. His pack torn, shredded from him and then he saw them. Saw a mountain of death and glossy eyed stares where his family, and love had been. He walked the mount of the dead. It put his heart asunder and his soul to ash as he reached out to touch the Beloved bond. The bond. It flaked away, like particles of sand. The Beloved bond – gone.

“Steve?” he cried out and the tears he wept somehow materialized his lost love in front of him. Steve lay before him, battered, wounded, and bleeding out. No, no, no! Tony rushed to Steve’s side and searched for any sign, any molecule of life. It ebbed away, leaking like the blood staining the rocks below Steve. Kneeling, Tony reached out with his soul and the tattered remains answered him.

Empty.

Alone.

Nothing left.

He gasped and clutched Steve’s dirty uniform. Burying his head against Steve’s shoulder, he sobbed. “Don’t leave me, please.” The resounding echo of nothing answered him. His soul cleaved and his core shattered. No life, no soul. Nothing. He collapsed on top of Steve.

He gave up his soul to Steve, tried to coax him back to life. But all of Steve’s life had drained away, feeding the rocks, and dirt, and Earth below them. His soul was absent – gone – as if it had never existed.

When Tony looked up to the hole in the sky he realized it wasn’t an invasion after all. The hole there- the pitch black with no stars – it represented Tony. Dug out. His chest felt dug out, clawed away. Nothing left.

Nothing.

Empty.

Alone.

He couldn’t feel the rest of the pack. Numbness grew until it became all encompassing, until it settled in his chest and developed into this nascent creature, devouring every thread of life. He shuddered. He’d lost his mother, once. Long ago. Everyone on Earth was destined to be an orphan, to lose the one person who innately cared for them. As he cradled the empty shell of the man he loved in his arms, Tony knew that pain of saying goodbye to his mother became a distant thing. Losing Steve, losing his Beloved, ripped away the last shreds of his soul and left him wanting and angry.

He wept quietly, profoundly until it felt like the day might die around him and life itself might flicker out. He cried until a hand touched his shoulder and he felt the spattering of rain on his face. He mourned until he opened his eyes to see Steve not dead and motionless in his arms, but holding him and kissing his temples.

“Shush, it’s okay. Everything is going to be all right,” Steve murmured.
For a long moment, Tony didn’t understand. He couldn’t comprehend what had happened. He only knew the reality of loss. He focused on the rain blemished surroundings. Thor was standing to the side with the girl and her brother. Bruce – now Hulk – stood close to Tony. The Hulk’s mighty hand was on Tony’s shoulder; it had been his touch – not Steve’s – that led Tony out of the hell vision. He had no idea what had happened, if the Hydra cell had been contained. Did they get the scepter? What had happened? His pack circled around him and yet as they did he felt something new – something strange – as if he saw the pack in double vision.

That’s when he shifted his gaze to Natasha. The blurriness of her soul’s energy focused like a laser beam. All those times that Tony had tried to figure out what was different about her – he finally understood. This wasn’t her first bonding – she had another that, somehow, had been torn from her. What Tony experienced now was that tear being sown, repaired. She held onto Barnes as if she clasped her own Beloved. It startled him, and he looked at Steve in question.

“Shush.” Steve only rocked him and promised him everything would be all right. As he glanced around the circle though, seeds of doubt blossomed.

Chapter End Notes

Well we have only 2 major chapters to go because chapter 17 is only an epilogue.

I am participating in the Cap-IronMan Big Bang this year and am focusing all of my attention on my story for the event. 80% is due by 26 September and I am nearly at 20% (which is good considering I just started 2 weeks ago). I want to get the BB to that 80% or complete by 26 September, so I will post the next chapter of Beloved on Sunday 2 September. It's written, it only needs revisions. I hope you liked this chapter. I would really like to know what you think might happen in the next few chapters! I hope that my ending will satisfy!
Lightning

Chapter Summary

Steve deals with the aftermath of finding the rest of their soul pack. Things don’t go as planned...

Chapter Notes

I am very sorry that this is late. Hope you enjoy it. Some warnings in the end notes.

Sorry no beta on this one. My beta is very busy right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The flight home had been horrendous. That was the only word Steve could use to describe it. They contained the Hydra cell, secured von Strucker, and Fury with the help of Hill brought in back up to clean up and transport the prisoners. That still left them with the twins and Bucky. All Steve wanted to do had been to save Bucky, to save the twins. On the trip in the jet, Thor kept the siblings under his watchful eye while Natasha piloted the Quin Jet. Hawkeye, although a little bruised and sporting a graze injury from a bullet, spent his time huddled with the twins talking to them and discussing the true nature of the Hydra cell that pretended to be SHIELD. Bucky on the other hand, sat there, his eyes glazed and his expression dull and lifeless. Even the bond felt limp and weak. Steve didn’t dare approach him not with Tony in the state he had been the entire flight. Ashen, pale, numb radiated from Tony.

Steve attempted to reach him, to get him to respond, but his body stayed lax and his soul remained a dreadful single beat. Trapped, Tony emitted a sense of being trapped and isolated. Steve held back his own boiling emotions, since he wanted to jump up and scream at the terrified youth and his sister, ask them what the hell they did. Though, Steve had to confess, the urge to yell at Bucky overwhelmed him as well. Wasn’t the pack supposed to save them from such reactions, didn’t it permit a deeper understanding? Even as he thought it, the flashes of images came to him. They were the same images that hunted him as he took down von Strucker, the same shocking sensations that nearly distracted him enough that his assailant almost took him down instead. Every second of Tony’s mother’s death had been shared along the soul lines. Steve was surprised that actual astral projections like holographs hadn’t danced in the courtyard of the fortress. How could Bucky share such memories? Why would he?

Steve had swallowed down the bile and hugged an unresponsive Tony closer. He’d convinced Tony earlier to remove the armor. He stared at Bucky across the short distance in the jet. He wanted to call out, to say something, to beg him to remember who he was, but nothing came to his lips. He felt as shell shocked as the man in his arms. Everything had gone to hell.

When the jet loomed over the Tower, Tony suddenly came to life. In a clear deadly voice, he said, “I don’t want them in my Tower. I don’t want him in my home.”

Steve bit back his words. Hawkeye took charge. He went forward to the cockpit and said something
to Natasha Steve hadn’t caught – or maybe he had but his brain refused to process it. When the Quin Jet landed on the pad at the Tower, Steve escorted Tony down the rampway, with only Sam in tow. Everyone else stayed on board. Steve turned to question, but Hawkeye waved him off.

“We got this one Cap. There’s a safe house.”

“Not your family home,” Steve said. He wouldn’t put Hawkeye’s family in danger. The twins and Bucky were pack members but volatile and unpredictable.

“No. We’ll call. Don’t worry.” Hawkeye pointed to Sam. “Take care of them.”

Sam, with arms folded across his chest, said, “I wouldn’t think to do anything else.”

Hawkeye gave a salute and went back inside the jet. As they stepped away, the Quin Jet rose and launched into the air, the hot exhaust blowing back at them. Tony collapsed as it disappeared into the heavens, but Sam kept his wits about him and managed to catch him before he fell.

Steve came to the rescue and lifted Tony into his arms. “I got this.”

“You sure?”

“I kind of have to, don’t I?” Steve tried his best to sound casual, as if none of any of this affected him as deeply and as messily as it did. Sam read right through it. The soul bond between them jittered and Steve knew it blared like a trumpet that he was covering. Sam, though, gentleman that he was, nodded.

“I’m going to check on the rest of the pack. I’ll be around to check on-.” He stopped and stared at Tony with his head resting against Steve’s shoulder, appearing asleep. “Well, everything, a bit later.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Sam walked into the Tower and disappeared in the elevator. Steve didn’t even know where he was going. Did Sam have an apartment in the Tower? Or was he staying elsewhere? Steve couldn’t remember one way or the other – his brain felt heavy in his skull. Then his arms tensed as he held Tony against his chest. Without a word, he headed toward the penthouse bedroom.

Except for the moment when he declared that Bucky and the Maximoff twins would not be staying in the Tower, Tony remained unresponsive. Steve brought him to the bed as soon as he entered the room. He laid him down and then sat next to him. Images rebounded in the bond, sights and sounds Steve barely grasped. In many ways the pictures in his head reminded him of watching two different movies edited together. He cupped his hand around Tony’s fist.

“Tony, please, what can I do?” Steve said, and the ache pulsed through the bond, an ache so deep and so powerful it took his breath away. “Please, Tony, you have to talk to me. I can’t help you. All I see are these pictures, these moving pictures that remind me of the silent movies back in the day. Explain to me what’s in your head. I can’t help yo-.”

“That’s just it, you can’t,” Tony muttered, and he glared at Steve. “You’re going to die. All of you are going to die. Just like my mother died.”

Steve tightened his hand around Tony’s, failing to impart his support he was sure, but it was all he had, all he could do. “Tony, I’m right here.”

“No,” Tony said, and he sat up. “It doesn’t matter. Don’t you get it?” He yanked his hand away from Steve’s and that sliced into his heart. Tony pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. When he dropped them, tears leaked down his cheeks and he did nothing to hide them. “It’s all a fucking mess.”
“What is?”

“I don’t want him in my house. Do you understand me?” Tony hissed.

His mind was all over the place – his soul a juddering mess. Steve couldn’t hold onto it. Clasping Tony’s soul felt like trying to tame a hurricane. “Bucky and the twins aren’t here. Hawkeye and Natasha took them to a safe house.” He didn’t say that sooner or later, Steve would have to follow. He needed to. Not only was he their pack leader, but he was also Bucky’s friend.

“I can’t have him here.” Abruptly, Tony jumped up, knocking Steve away. “I know I said I could do this for you. I know I promised.” He paced around the room, stopped at the marble fireplace and then laid his head against the mantle. “You didn’t see it. You didn’t feel it. Somehow the damned bond – it recognized me as the son of the woman he killed. He killed her, Steve. Not with a gun or a knife. But his hand. His fucking flesh and blood hand. He didn’t even do it with the metal one. He fucking did it with his human hand. And I felt every god damned second of it.”

Words stuck in Steve’s throat as a sinking feeling consumed him. Steve shook his head, not in denial but in stunned silence. He didn’t have any idea what to say, how to deal with the subject. He never even tried to say anything.

“I can’t have that bastard in my house. You invited him into the pack. You!” Tony pointed at Steve. “You – this god damned soul pack gave me this fucking gift.” Tony tore at his hair. “I felt her die. I felt the bones in her throat pop and crack.” He gagged and a sob broke free. Steve went to his feet and stepped up to him, but Tony shoved him away. “What do you expect me of? I’m not a damned saint. I can’t forgive him. Never. And you did this to me. You gave me this fucking memory because of this.” He jabbed at the mark on his arm that ran up under his shirt to his chest.

Steve reached out and Tony batted him away, but he didn’t let that stop him. He grabbed at Tony, not letting him go. He braced his hands on Tony’s shoulders. His own eyes watered and tears streamed down his cheeks. “You have to know, Tony. I know you. I know you get it that he was a prisoner of Hydra, made to do those things.”

Tony shook his head. “No, I don’t care. I don’t fucking care.” He battered Steve. Hit him over and again with clenched fists against Steve’s chest. The sobbing wouldn’t stop. “He killed her. He killed my mother, my mom.”

“God, I know, I know,” Steve said and brought Tony into an embrace, holding him tight to his chest until the violence disintegrated and he slumped into Steve’s arms.

Tony cried. He cried until there was no more tears, until the lights outside grew weary of the day and faded away. Steve held him, kissed him, mourned with him. Steve slipped his one arm under Tony’s legs again and carried him to the bed. He didn’t leave him but cuddled against him and kept him safe and tucked in close. After a while, the crying turned to small weeping and then finally to only a whispered shiver of emotion.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said. “I wish I could make it better.”

“You can’t,” Tony said. He buried his face in Steve’s chest. “And then she gave me a vision.” Steve had no idea what Tony was talking about so he stayed silent. “She – the girl what did Hill say her name was again?”

“Wanda, I think Wanda,” Steve answered. He laid his chin against the top of Tony’s hand, quietly petting his hair.
“Yeah, Wanda, she used her voodoo magic or whatever the hell it was to give me this vision. You were dead. You were all dead. But you were blown to pieces. And the bond…” He trembled in Steve’s arms. “Felt like all my limbs had been ripped off. I never want to feel like that again. What the hell did she do?”

Steve kissed Tony’s hair. “I don’t know. It was a defense, maybe? Give you a nightmare and try and get away?”

Tony whined a little and then started a long slow weeping. Steve wrapped his arms around Tony. He wanted desperately to do something more for him, to reassure him, to support him. Within the core of his soul, he touched the embers that brought them together. He grasped the hot coals but found they did not burn, instead they warmed him, and he spread the warmth outward, feeling it expand from his chest, along the lines of his soul mark. The Beloved mark.

Tony jerked in his arms and mumbled, “What?”

Steve allowed the fire to stretch out along the scars. He found himself tear away his shirt and then pulling the zipper open on Tony’s undersuit. He pushed it aside and then brought Tony close, until they were skin to skin – matching soul marks touching, melding together. Much like he had when Tony had suffered the minor burn injury during their training, Steve used the touch of their skin to merge their souls. Yet this time it deepened, widened, until Steve couldn’t tell the edge of his soul from Tony’s. In a swirl of colors and sounds, their astral energies fluctuated and fused. The complexity, the expansion of their souls seemed to encompass whole universes. It astonished Steve and he gasped out as Tony clung to him.

The energy waves enfolded them. It felt a little like standing underneath the cosmic stars of equations Tony designed to mathematically represent their soul pack. Yet, it switched and transformed into a kaleidoscope of their souls’ energies, mixing and merging, colliding and collapsing all at the same time. As the worlds of their souls swirled around them, it focused down, narrowed to only the Beloved bonds. The facets of their souls grew into a crystalline dimension of space forever linking them together. He heard Tony gasp at the geometric beauty of it, experienced the reflection of his emotions through the bond, and saw their bonds as Tony did in a strange kind of shadow of his own perception. The wonder within stretched outward, brought their senses – all of them – into play until every nerve tingled, until the sounds of their souls became a symphony, until they tasted their energies, and luxuriated in each other’s fragrance. The sights astounded Steve, but the one thing that made him breathless, that made him weep was the touch. Too touch Tony’s soul was to touch the sun and never get burned. A kiss paled in significance. And as he accepted, and Tony offered, as Steve offered, and Tony accepted, the sensations only built until he cried out and all the wonder burst through a conflagration of senses.

He eased away from Tony, panting and trembling from the effects of their soul exploration. Tony looked wide-eyed at him; the tears dried on his face. “What? What was that?”

Steve only shook his head. He had no idea. The last time he’d touched their marks together, it had been to help Tony heal. Nothing like this at all had happened.

“That was like better than sex,” Tony said and then swayed forward back into Steve’s arms. He shivered against Steve.

After long moments of settling and calming, Steve whispered, “I’m so sorry, Tony. I didn’t want you to face him alone. I wanted to be there.” Maybe if he’d been there things would have been different. He could have controlled the soul bond, cut it off. “The bond shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Tony asked. “We regularly share dreams in your 1940s tenement apartment.
Why not share the moment of my mother’s death?” The tension wasn’t there this time, the words were angry but hopeless, and that terrified Steve.

He rubbed his hand up and down Tony’s back, trying to help but feeling the same hopelessness. “He’s a good man. I know you don’t want to hear that, but Hydra is responsible. Bucky – even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.” He continued talking even though he knew that Tony didn’t want to hear it. He rushed through the words. “That tenement apartment. I lost it. I think I told you that. I couldn’t afford the rent. I couldn’t afford my food, or medicines. Nothing. Bucky, he took me in. He wanted to help. Even when he went away to the war, he still cared. I stayed in his apartment and he paid the rent.”

Tony pressed his cheek against Steve’s shoulder. “That sounds like a good guy.”

“He was.” Steve found tears streaming freely down his own face. “I can’t even begin to imagine what horror he had to have gone through to do something as hideous as what he did to your mother.”

Tony clutched onto Steve, his fingers digging into his upper arms. “God, I can’t lose you to him. I can’t. Please, don’t leave me for him.”

Steve lifted Tony’s head gently from his shoulder, cupping his jaw. “I’m never leaving you. That’s not what this is.”

“I saw you die,” Tony whispered and then he leaned forward and placed his head on Steve’s so that their foreheads touched. “You know what’s worse?”

“What?”

“The worse part was – that of all of it – it was the image of you dead at my feet, the pack gone, all the souls in tatters that broke-.” He stopped, stuttering into a sob. “Tha-that broke me. Broke everything.”

Words failed to comfort. Steve turned to their astral projections, worked through their soul bond to offer strength and support to Tony as he wept in his arms. The memories shared through the bond, while horrifying, were something that Steve could make sense of – he could offer solace and also logical explanations. The vision given to Tony by the Maximoff twin – that was ground that Steve never tread upon in his life. Sure, he was part of a metaphysical soul pack, but that didn’t lend itself to a deeper understanding of these visions. If they were visions. Were they just something simple – like a nightmare fantasy? Or was Steve dealing with some prediction of the future?

“Tony, I think you need to rest, now,” Steve whispered. He needed to get down to the bottom of these visions. He needed to contact Hawkeye to find out where the safe house was and to go and question the young woman himself. If he could get Tony to settle down and sleep for a while, Steve might be able to track down some of the answers to his questions.

Tony exhaled and then threw a hand up to his face. “I don’t think I can close my eyes. I keep seeing her. I keep feeling it.”

Steve enclosed Tony in his arms and kissed the crown of his head. Through the waves of their souls, he detected the halting, quiet despair shadowing Tony. “You need to sleep.”

“Stay with me?” Tony asked, and he bowed his head against Steve’s chest. While Steve wanted to beg off, so he could investigate the possibilities of the vision, he nodded in reply.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Steve said. He suppressed his own disappointment. The last thing he wanted was for Tony to think he longed to escape. He stroked at hand down Tony’s back, slowly
and rhythmically. “Just sleep. I’m right here.”

It took a while, but Tony eased and relaxed enough against Steve that his breathing evened out and he softly snored. His body tucked under Tony’s there was no way to extricated himself, so no stranger to stressful situations, Steve decided the best thing to do was to get some rest. He closed his eyes. The idea of going to the dreamscape popped up and he thought it might be a great opportune time for it to be available again.

As he dosed he felt Tony’s weight against him and found solace that at least he could give his Beloved this small gift.

“Is this what you do now? This?”

He startled and sat up, jerking against the hand crocheted bedspread. Sunlight blinded him for a moment, but then his eyes adjusted, and he recognized the flat. It wasn’t the tenement room from the 1940s, but the apartment he shared with Bucky. The place he called home and Bucky paid the rent. Standing in the entrance to the bedroom, Bucky leaned against the doormframe. He had a cigarette and he had both arms – flesh and blood. He hadn’t lit his smoke, because even though doctors insisted that the nicotine would be good for Steve’s asthma they both knew that the smoke only aggravated his breathing.

Bucky pointed at the bed, a look of disgusted marring his features. “God damn it, Steve, I knew it. I just fucking knew it.”

Steve twisted around to see the bare shoulder of the man lying beside him. The sheet and bedspread had been pushed lower, draped over the hip of the man – of Tony. Steve swallowed hard and reached out as if to touch him – but then he yanked his hand back. It made no sense because he wasn’t him anymore. He wasn’t Captain America. He was skinny, sickly Steve Rogers again, before Project Rebirth.

“Bucky?” He wanted to ask what had happened. How it had happened, but the look of absolute disdain on his friend’s face stopped him. “What’s goin-.”

“What’s going on?” Bucky strolled into the room. Even when he was angry, Bucky kept a certain swagger to his step. “I’ll tell you what’s going on.” He plucked the cigarette from his lips and pulled out his match book. “I’ll tell you. That is a man in your bed. You got fucking hickeys all over your neck and chest. And you been fucking a guy or should I assume you’re the little woman in this relationship?”

Steve gripped the bedspread – the one his mother made him right before she died. He held in tightly in his hands. “No, Buck, no. You don’t understand. It’s this soul ma-.“ He looked at his wrist and saw unblemished skin. He checked his arm, his chest – nothing. No soul mark. Nothing to indicate that the universe had intervened in his life. “I didn’t-.“

“You didn’t let him? Did he force you?”

Steve turned and looked at the ridge of Tony’s muscular arm, the curve of his hip. He remembered the feel, the weight of Tony on top of him. He shivered with the idea of Tony’s kisses.

“God! He didn’t. You let him. You’re a god damned fairy,” Bucky growled out and then put the cigarette to his lips. He lit it and puffed the smoke at Steve. “You just want to die. Don’t you? They’re gonna find out, you know. The cops are gonna find out. And you know what happens to little fairy boys in prison, don’t you Stevie? They’ll fucking pass you around. You’re be a rag, a slut.” He threw up his hands. “God, maybe that’s what you want. That’s what you perverts dream
“Don’t say that!” Steve went to stand up but then realized he had no clothes. Sure, Bucky had seen him naked a number of times, but under these circumstances Steve decided it might be better to be a little less revealing. “Don’t. It’s not like that. And people don’t think that. Not anymore.”

“Not anymore?” Bucky spun around on his heel and then whipped right back to Steve again. “Look at you. Is this what you want? Him?” He shook his head. His long hair – the hair he had as the Winter Soldier, not as the man Steve knew all those years ago. He was some kind of an amalgamate of the Bucky Steve knew and the Winter Soldier. He smashed the cigarette on the doorframe and tossed it to the side. “What would your mother think?”

“Please,” Steve said and had no idea what he was asking for, begging for from his friend. Understanding, patience? He didn’t know, but the idea of losing Bucky tightened his throat and when he looked around the apartment it narrowed, the walls closed in. Tony, still sleeping beside him, faded and became ghostlike next to him.

“Steve, you can’t do this. You can’t. You do this, what will everyone think about Captain America? You can’t. You have a responsibility.”

With those words, Steve glanced down at himself and the sickly man he was disappeared and he returned to his enhanced form again. “So, I’m not supposed to have anything for me?”

“Is that what this is? Or did that soul mark decide for you. Did you want this? Did you want him before this?” Bucky pointed to the scarring on Steve’s chest. It was back – all of the marks were back.

“It’s more complicated than that. The soul mark, the whole thing, it opened my eyes to what I was denying-.” Steve said and suddenly he was standing, clothed in his Captain America uniform except his helmet was gone, his shield not there, and they were in the Helicarrier all over again. His face swelled with the beating he’d taken, and he felt the ache of the bullet wounds to his belly. “Bucky, please.”

“No,” Bucky said and shook his head. His arm transformed to the metal one – the one that packed enough of a punch to level Captain America. “No! My best friend isn’t a god damned fairy and I will fucking kill him for doing this to you!”

Instinctively, Steve knew that Tony’s inert form lay behind him. Maybe it was the soul waves or the pulse of the energy through his own neurons, but he knew, and he understood that his broken body shielded Tony against an onslaught attack by a bereaved Winter Soldier.

“Bucky, I’m still the same person. I swear it. I swear it.” Tears welled in his eyes as he tried to reason with Bucky, as the ache in his belly exploded and he struggled to stay on his feet.

“I’m only doing this for your own good,” Bucky said, and he pulled back his left metallic arm. Steve heard the whirl of the gears and the powering up of the fist. He wouldn’t be able to block it; he barely stood a chance to stay on his feet as it was.

“God, I loved you like a brother. You brought me back from them. And now this?” Bucky mourned, and he let loose, the fist crashed into Steve’s cheekbone and it shattered, sending rockets of pain blasting through Steve’s skull.

He screamed out a cry and came awake. Panting Steve shuddered and picked up his hand to touch his cheek. All he felt was the warmth of his tears. Tony shuffled awake next to him. He rubbed at his
eyes.

“Hey? What’s going on?” Tony murmured.

“Nothing, nothing. Sam just sent a text. You sleep. I’ll be right back.” Steve leaned down and kissed Tony’s temple as his Beloved drifted back to slumber.

Slipping out of the bed, Steve picked up his clothes and tossed them in the laundry. He still wore his uniform pants. Going to the en suite, he threw cold water on his face and shivered. The echo of the pain danced in his head and he gripped the edge of the sink. He thought he might be sick, the need to throw up powerful. He leaned over the sink and vomited bile. After he rinsed his mouth, the dry heaves followed. He stayed in the bathroom, hunched over the sink, holding the sides of the counter until he thought the granite would crack. Finally, the episode passed, and he mustered the strength to clean up and then he left the bedroom to find his way to his floor and change his clothes after a long shower.

In the shower he leaned against the wall and thought of Bucky in the dream. Was it the real Bucky? Is that what Bucky thought of him? Would think of him once he confessed? The dream space with Tony had prepared him for his transition, for the acceptance of who he was – but now it was just a nightmare of what he would confront when he saw Bucky again. “Shit.” He cried then. He didn’t want anyone to see him or hear him. For God’s sake he was Captain America – but the soul bond was a curse and hurt him time and again. The cold of the tile did nothing to take away the fact he denied so much, but at the same time he’d forgotten who he was – who he grew up to be. He put his hands over his face letting the water pound down on him.

When his mind turned to Tony and his heart fluttered in response, he needed to grab the side of the shower and hold himself steady or else he would collapse. What the hell was he going to do? How was he going to handle Bucky and Tony? What the hell was the universe thinking when it linked him to both of them?

Alone, he permitted the feeling to helplessness to wash over him, but he also muttered the Mantra as a shield against the rest of the pack honing in on his dismal feelings. What was he going to do? Tony had been right all along. Inviting both of them into the pack asked for disaster, but the truth was he hadn’t consciously done it. Or had he? He’d made decisions to try and bring people into the pack from Sam to Clint. He’d never considered trying not to allow someone into the pack. He made sure though when he shook someone’s hand in a casual manner that he muttered the Mantra at the same time keeping his soul in check. So, had he, in the past, controlled the selection in some minor ways? Could he have stopped the selection of Bucky? Of Tony?

Would he have wanted to?

And now that those bonds were locked in, what could he do to ensure peace within the pack? He doubted Wong or Strange would have answers. He had to fashion an answer on his own. His pack had finally started to come together, but now, he feared the future of it. He was bound to lose someone. Someone important. He swallowed down the taste of bile again and then dropped his hands and let the water rain over his face.

“Captain, I am sorry to bother you, but you do have a visitor,” JARVIS said.

He jerked in response and nearly fell on the slippery tile. He acknowledged it. “Thanks JARVIS. Who is it?”

“It is Mister Wilson.”
“Thanks,” he said and then switched off the faucets. He would have liked to stay alone longer but it was time to face the music. He stepped out of the shower, dried off efficiently, and grabbed his robe from the hook on the bathroom door. He expected Sam to be waiting in the living room, not standing at parade rest in the center of his bedroom. Steve released a breath before walking past Sam and going to his bureau.

“Tell me you’re not pushing that Mantra out to stifle the pack again,” Sam said.

“No, I’m not,” Steve said. “I’m trying to clear my head of a nightmare, if you must know.” He pulled out his boxers and slipped them on before turning around to face Sam. “Is that all?” He sounded abrasive. “Sorry. Just the nightmare threw me off.”

“Old war memories?” Sam asked, and he seemed to relax a degree, though Steve sensed he was still on high alert.

Steve murmured a yeah, though it felt like lying. Maybe it was. “I gotta get dressed.”

“Yeah, you do. Thor’s here to talk to you,” Sam said and promptly left the room. Steve spun around on his heel to question him, but the door closed as he opened his mouth to speak. Instead he settled for a muttered curse.

He dressed quickly - jeans, blue t-shirt, white tube socks - and then he tied on sneakers. He didn’t really like sneakers, but Natasha got him to wear them more often than not these days. When he reached out to her through the soul bonds now, he got a disconnected feeling as if the soul bond stretched and thinned. He hated the feel of it and tried to reel her back in, even after his near breakdown in the shower. He might think of the soul pack as something of a curse at times, but the truth of the matter was they were his family as well as his team. He groaned. Of course, Sam would be pissed at him. God, he needed to get his damned head on straight.

When he walked out to the main living room of his apartment in the Tower, Thor greeted him. He wore casual clothes similar to Steve’s, only his t-shirt was red in color. His hair was pulled back and he offered his hand. Steve took it in a firm grasp and then Thor reeled him in to hug him. With a slap on the back, Thor said, “I must admit, my friend, I have missed you.”

“Thor, I was only gone a few hours,” Steve said as they parted.

“Well, it has been a long time since we talked as friends. We have been caught up in this soul pack and team machinations. And I miss our camaraderie.”

Steve considered whether Thor might be playing him but decided to take it at face value. He thumbed behind him. “You want something to eat? I was going to make something.” Steve couldn’t remember the last time he ate, and he was famished.

“I could eat,” Thor said and smiled. He followed Steve into the large kitchen. The curved island in the center sectioned off the working part of the kitchen with the large entertainment space. The sheer scale of it measured larger than his apartment in DC; it dwarfed anything he lived in when he grew up.

He pulled out the egg carton, butter, and then found the frying pan. With some cheese, onions, and milk he set about making omelets. He didn’t have any ham at all and wondered just how he had all the fresh groceries stocked in his refrigerator, but then he recalled JARVIS.

He started to whisk the eggs. “You know, life is pretty different now, and I’m not just talking about the soul pack.”
Thor took a seat on a stool at the island. “I find myself thinking the same thing. Once, I dreamed of being the King of my people. I would conquer all the realms, I would sit in the Hall of Asgard and rule. Now, I wouldn’t wish that on my darkest enemy.”

As Steve poured the egg mixture into the sizzling frying pan, he glanced at Thor. “So, you feel differently about that. How about other things? Like being here and not at home?” Maybe it was a bit selfish to be asking Thor such a leading question, but Steve needed to know how he dealt with being so out of place much of the time.

Thor smiled. “I enjoy the new experiences. Being here, I like it quite a great deal.” He pointed to the mark on his wrist that indicated his place in the pack. “I never would have seen myself as a Guide. I would have thought Warrior or some such. To be named a Guide – it is teaching me something about myself.”

“I never meant to upset you about it, Thor,” Steve said and the same ache he had that day it happened pinged in his chest – a hollow ring. He blinked away the tears of his loss and continued with the preparation of the omelet.

“You haven’t, my friend.”

Steve placed a napkin and a fork in front of Thor and then served him a plate with a large omelet. “And I don’t think you’re hear to shoot the breeze either. What’s happened?” Steve would have let it play out if the nightmare had riled up his anxieties.

“It is true, my friend. I would like to speak to you about the pack. But as your Guide. I am not here only to report out what has happened but to give you some sound advice.” He put down his fork after devouring half of the monster omelet already.

But Steve forgot the eggs and everything else, the only thing his brain focused in on was the report out – something had happened. He cursed inwardly but remained stoic to his friend. “What is it you want to say, Thor?” That sounded more like a challenge than a friendly question. He attempted to calm his nerves, but he conceded it was a lost cause. “Sorry, tell me.”

Thor nodded several times before he said, “It is your brother in arms, the pack’s Brother.”

He suspected as much, but he truly didn’t know if he wanted to hear what had driven Thor to leave the safe house with the new pack members to come and talk to Steve. The images of the dream space roared back to life and it took all his strength not to cut and run. For all his growing up years, Steve listened to his mother – he stood his ground, he always got back up. But this – this tested his resolve and his love. That last – his love – it terrified him. Everything he’d built with Tony over the last few weeks would crumble and dissolve if the nightmare became the reality.

Steve mustered the courage and said, “Tell me.”

“He wants to see you.”

It felt more like a proclamation instead of a simple statement. Steve released a pent-up breath. “I’ll see him, soon.”

Thor pushed the plate of eggs away. “You must come now. Our good Healer, Bruce, believes he is not stable. He needs your influence as both his friend and his pack leader.”

Steve looked up where the penthouse was and then back at Thor. The idea of leaving Tony alone in a vulnerable state as he desperately sank into a well of sorrow pushed Steve toward the edge of his own despair. He’d only just came to a comfortable understanding with his sexuality and now the
haunting images of the dream space shadowed him. Having it hang over his head pushed down on
his shoulders until he literally felt it in his bones.

“I don’t know, Thor. This isn’t a good time with Tony,” Steve said and knew he had no excuses. He
needed to do his duty as pack leader and not just a soul mate to Tony.

Thor turned saturnine. He bowed his head and then said, “You must understand your responsibilities.
Just as I have come to understand my own.” He faced Steve. “I have come to know that I cannot
leave Asgard and the Realms without a protector. My father sits on a precarious throne. While I shun
the throne, Ragnarok, the end of all things, will be upon us and I am destine to try and stop it. Yet, I
sit here and protect only Midgard. Am I the protector I should be? Have I lost my way for the love of
one woman?”

“Thor, I don-.” What could he say? He knew little of Asgard and the greater worries of the Nine
Realms. He always wanted to know more. When Thor spoke of his home he always fell into a quiet
reserved demeanor. Thor tended to keep his memories and stories about Asgard to the minimum and
Steve suspected it might be due to the fact any mention of his home brought back the guilt of his
abandoned responsibilities.

“If you don’t do this, then you know that you will pay as well as the rest of the pack.” Thor stood up.
“The pack is your family, Steven. Believe me when I say to you if you do not tend your family, your
brother, you will pay and so will all of them. Including Tony.” He gave a tight smile. “I consider you
my greatest friend on Midgard. I am honored to be your Guide. Please take heed of my words.” He
offered his hand to Steve and his grip was firm but tender. “I bid you peace, my friend and leader.”

He left the kitchen and Steve stood staring at the cooling omelets and his stomach flipped over
considering his next actions. As he remained paralyzed a fresh tingling spread over his arm and
centered on the soul mark for Brother. Steve winced and clamped his hand over his wrist.

What the hell was he coming to?

It crashed down on him; the fact that once again he was derelict in his duties as a pack leader. He’d
left Clint, Natasha, Bruce, and Thor to deal with the new members. Again, he focused solely on his
own needs – his Beloved. He wasn’t just a soul mate, but a pack leader and he’d screwed up again.
The pack needed him. But then again, Tony fell apart in his arms. Was he simply supposed to leave
him alone to deal with a mix of emotions? Was that the way he needed to act? Was part of being
pack leader cutting himself off from his Beloved? Right now, he’d sliced away at the rest of the
pack. He abandoned them again at their most vulnerable moments. It wasn’t right.

None of it was.

The Brother emblem on his arm sizzled again and he grit his teeth. He had no other choice.
“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Is Tony still asleep?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Steve took in a breath, held it to calm himself, sent out the Mantra in a cooling wave, and then said,
“Is Sam around?”

“Mister Wilson has gone to his apartment in the Tower.”
Steve smiled. Of course, he did. Tony thought of everything. Now, he needed to make an escape without JARVIS ratting him out. He ended up getting ready as quietly as he could and managed not to wake Tony. He left the apartment in civil clothes and without his shield. It was a choice, but he made it and he would need to live with it. As he stood outside the Tower, he called Sam.

“Yea-yeah?”

“Sorry to wake you, but could send me the location of the safe house?”

Several grunt and sighs answered him and then a yawn. “Steve?”

“Yeah, I’m outside the Tower and I need the location of the safe house.” The predawn hours warmed the city in colors of reds and oranges. It would rain today.

“Safe house? Oh,” Sam said and grumbled under his breath. “Why didn’t you just come to my door?”

“Just tell me the location, okay?” Steve said and then thought maybe he should have called Nat. The possibility that their phones were off due to the fact they were in a safe house had occurred to him.

“Upstate,” Sam said. “That’s what Nat said.” He gave Steve the address. “She said to approach cautiously – they have traps set.”

“Oh lovely,” Steve responded. “Go back to sleep, Sam.”

“Will do.”

“And Sam, keep an eye on Tony. Don’t let him follow me,” Steve said and quickly disconnected to stop any interrogation. Was that necessary? The ramming of his heart in his chest like he’d just run the distance from the city to the safe house and back again told him he was playing a dangerous game. He didn’t want Tony to misinterpret what was going on. Yet, Tony focused only on one thing – the fact that someone with Bucky’s face killed his parents. No matter how many times Steve uttered – but it wasn’t Bucky – Tony might never accept it as truth. So, Steve only had a one way avenue to take and that meant keeping Tony in the dark – for now. Just for now until he figured out what the hell to do. He’d come clean – just like he had with the information about Tony’s parents. It wouldn’t end up sacrificing everything they’d built over the last few weeks.

Steve muttered the Mantra as he went to the garage and got his bike. It would be at least a three hour drive. That meant that there was no way for Steve to make it there, deal with Bucky, and then back again before Tony woke up and noticed Steve was gone. One way or another Steve would end up paying for leaving the Tower and not telling Tony. He hopped on the bike after donning his Captain America helmet to stop the police for pulling him over. He didn’t start up the bike right away as he mulled over the right decision.

Should he stop and call Tony? Tell him that he would be away? Tearing the helmet off, he pulled out his phone and called, he left a message. “Tony, I have to go and do some pack leader stuff. I’ll be back as soon as I’m able.”

That seemed vague enough. He closed the connection and rolled his eyes. Nat would laugh at him – she was right. He had no idea how to lie. Without further delay, he put his helmet back on and started the engine of his motorcycle. A few hours on the road might help to clear his head.

Instead every moment further away from Tony sent draggers of pain through his soul mark on his wrist and up through the scarring on his chest. He kept going though, because he knew he had to accept the responsibility as the pack leader. He couldn’t delegate the duty all the time. Tony would
understand, he told himself with a nod. He had to believe it. Tony wanted a resolution to the idea of having a member of the pack that he saw as a threat. Steve grasped the initiative to do something about it. Tony couldn’t fault him, could he?

The same thoughts rolled around in his head all the way through the drive. He felt like a pot of water endlessly boiling but with no way to release the pent-up steam. By the time he drove up the gravel pathway to the safe house, the warning about the traps had all but disappeared from his mind. It ended up being a good thing that he wore the helmet considering a projectile smashed into his temple and nearly knocked him off his feet. The bike slipped out from under him and skidded off into the woods, tangling its tires in the underbrush. He swore and stood up only to have a laser cross grid light up around him.

He went to get his phone but an electric shock zapped through him, originating at his temple. Steve grabbed at his helmet and ripped it off, tossing it aside with the still humming bike. “Nat!” He sent a sharp reprimand through the soul waves and a little giggle answered him.

“Of course,” he said, and his shoulders slumped as he looked up into the cloudy sky. Why did he have to have a pack filled with not only assassins but smart asses as well.

“Your own fault, Cap, she did warn you,” Clint said as he hopped down from a perch up in the tree near the bike. He hit the ignition to turn it off but then twisted up his face at the state of the bike. “Might take a while to fix that.” He pointed to Steve. “How about you?”

“Your greeting leaves much to be desired,” Steve said and touched the welt forming on his temple. It would be gone in a day, but still it hurt like a son of a bitch. “You could kill someone with that thing.”

“Nah, we did that especially for you,” Clint said and slung his arm around Steve’s shoulders. With the other hand he tapped his earpiece. “Nat turn off the perimeter. I got him. Bring out someone to fish Cap’s bike out of the weeds.” He winked at Steve. “Come on let’s go.”

They walked amicably with Clint’s bow at the ready. As they trudged along the wooded path, Steve said, “It mustn’t be too bad considering you’re out here.”

Clint snorted. “Think again. The twins were nothing. They were easy. But your friend, there, he’s like a freaking bear.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Not as bad as it was at the start,” Clint answered. “We kind of had a secret weapon.”

Steve pushed away vines as they walked through the path. A light patter of rain started. “And what would that be?”

“I’ll let Nat tell you about that little surprise. Did cause some issues with Bruce, but Thor showed up on time this morning to quiet things down,” Clint said. “You should have hitched a ride with him.”

Steve shook his head and laughed. “What was I supposed to do? Let him tuck me under his arm as he flew here? No thank you.”

Clint eyed him and then asked, “Did you tell Tony that you were coming?”

Frowning, Steve looked ahead as he spotted the small cabin in the woods. A typical SHIELD safe house. He located the generator and then glanced up at the leafy canopy and wondered if the SHIELD surveillance apparatuses were still functional. “No, I didn’t. Not really.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I have a lot on my mind. Is this a SHIELD safe house?”

“Kind of – it’s really a Fury safe house.” They stepped out into the clearing and Steve noticed the rundown appearance of the cabin. It actually looked as if part of the roof caved in. The rain grew more intense as they walked out of the forest. “It’s more than you think. Come on.”

Steve followed Clint’s lead through the rain storm and into the shack, because that’s all he could really call it now that they were up close and personal with it. From the approach it looked like an ordinary cabin, but upon closer inspection the dilapidation of the structure became apparent. Clint jerked open the front door and they walked into a one room cabin that was abandoned. The fireplace to the one side had cracked stones and a broken mantle. Steve glanced at the single bed with its shattered frame and a crawling feeling went up his spine.

“Where?” he asked.

Clint went up to the fireplace and placed one of his wrist bands to the stones. The image shuttered, and an elevator appeared. He keyed in the code and then they walked onto the elevator. As the doors closed the stones on the fireplace materialized again. Steve smiled ruefully.

“Fury always has something to pull out of his very dark, very long leather coat,” Steve said.

“He sure does.” Clint touched his ear comm again. “On our way down.” He turned back to Steve. “This is one of the many safe houses that Fury has and not SHIELD. He let me know a few for my family’s safety.”

“That’s good. Underneath it all, Fury is a good man,” Steve said and then stared at his wrist. He should have tried to invite Fury into the pack. He needed someone with strength, and the attitude to lead. It might take some of the pressure off him.

“Don’t do it,” Clint said. “He won’t accept and will be pissed if you try.”

“Are you my Guide now?” Steve asked.

“No, but I understand Fury better than you do. So, don’t.”

They fell into silence. It allowed Steve time to search the soul energies, the bond lines that vibrated with energy. He could tell in the distance that Tony had awakened. Steve wasn’t sure if Tony realized he’d left or not, but he suspected JARVIS would have informed him. With a quiet brush of energy, Steve sent Tony a calm touch of intimacy. He hoped it would be enough for now. He focused on the present, on the problem at hand.

“So, you said that Bucky had been difficult?”

Clint smirked and, as the doors to the elevator opened, he replied, “That’s putting it mildly. Luckily though, Nat had an ace up her sleeve.”

Steve entered the true safe house that looked more like a loft apartment without the vast windows. Areas were sectioned off with partial walls. None of it looked like a prison which was something that had concerned Steve. The partial walls were at least 10 feet tall but the room itself was probably 15 feet in height at least. He caught the sounds of someone in a kitchen and other sounds of people speaking lowly. Clint ushered him through the gray painted vestibule area around a half wall to a kitchen. It looked utilitarian at best. The appliances were dingy white and the counter tops were probably Formica. Not the latest rage that was for sure.
Standing at a counter, chopping vegetables, Bruce looked up and smiled. “Nice to see you Cap.”

“It’s not even a day and you look like you’re making yourself comfortable here,” Steve said and crossed the room to shake Bruce’s hand.

“Well, considering the latest I needed something to calm down and reflect.”

“The latest? You mean the new pack members?” Steve asked, and he knew he threw that dart way off the mark.

Nat walked around the corner and smiled at him. Her eyes were tired, but something else glowed about her that Steve couldn’t pin down. Then he recalled that fuzziness about her spectral cloud that Tony had once showed him. Through the astral energies they shared, something had clicked into place – she became defined, whole. “What?”

“I never told you, not directly. I’m sorry,” she said, and her expression looked older than it should. She glimpsed Bruce for a second but then turned back to Steve. “I suspected, but there’s no use in sharing fairy tales, right?”

“Nat, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve said.

“Back in the day, when I was a lot younger. A lot younger. I had a trainer back after they moved me from the children’s wing of the KGB to the adult wing. I was there for a while and they got me a trainer because I excelled. I never saw his face – you have to understand Steve. He was never allowed to unmask, not completely.”

His heart throbbed in his ears. He thought he saw spots as if the whole world pixelated around him. The energy waves surged through the soul bonds and suddenly Bucky appeared around the corner and placed his metal hand on Natasha shoulder.

“What?” Steve heard himself say.

“Steve, Bucky was my trainer. He was in the Red Room with me. We bonded then. It was never a sexual bond, but it was a soul mate bond. No pack, just the two of us trying to get through the grueling training.”

Steve listened to them talking, watched as Bucky stared down at Natasha as if she might be a delicate flower he had to protect. No one ever looked at Natasha that way. No one. She wouldn’t permit it, but here she was allowing Bucky to touch her and keep her close and there was another layer of complexity he never prepared for – how was the pack supposed to deal with it? A bond that excluded the rest of the pack seemed counter to every definition of a pack.

“Is it even possible?” Steve asked out of the blue as Natasha kept talking about her days in the Red Room.

“What?” Nat asked.

Steve met Bucky’s gaze. “How is it possible you’re in our pack and not just soul mates. How does that work? I never heard of that before.” Not in all the studies he spent hours doing. They’d bonded before the soul pack. They should not have been able to link with him if they were already a bonded pair.

“The bond broke,” Natasha answered for them. “It’s complicated but the Russians have a method to strip soul bonds, or at least put them-.”
“On ice,” Bucky supplied, and the words went straight to Steve’s heart. He recalled the files on Bucky – the papers saying how he’d spent years frozen in between his missions.

“They scrambled his brain. Made him forget along with using us as Guinea pigs to strip the soul bond. It worked to a degree,” Natasha said. “I could never reach out to him, but I could feel him. I knew him, in a way, on the causeway-.”

“You shot her.” Steve said, and his world contorted on its axis. “Twice.” He wanted to throttle Bucky. Natasha was his friend, his close friend – his Confidant – and he would do anything to protect her.

“It wasn’t him,” Natasha said, and those words echoed the ones Steve had stated to Tony on numerous occasions. He needed to heed the words and quell his conflicted feelings that boil to the surface. As pack leader, all he wanted to do was protect his own – but as a mated soul he understood the need to protect the bond. Plus, his history with Bucky just made everything murkier and difficult to manage.

“It wasn’t.” Steve repeated. He had to because if he didn’t he might not believe it. “So, can someone give me an update?” Steve glanced around at everyone but never settled on Bucky. He should greet his old friend, but something intangible prickled between them. He needed a moment to settle his own troubled emotions.

Bruce stepped in to the weighted conversation. He finished chopping the vegetables and tossed them into a slow cooker. “The twins, Wanda and Pietro are doing well. They actually accepted the pack faster than I thought, though there is some resentment on their part concerning Tony.”

“Tony? Why?” Steve asked and there was an undercurrent, like a growl, from Bucky. Steve eyed him but then didn’t ask any questions about it.

“Seems they have a story about a bomb and their parents and Stark Industries.” Natasha had placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder as she shifted out of his touch.

“Oh,” Steve said. “It’s never easy.”

“We already knew that Sokovia had been supplied with Stark Industries weapons,” Maria said as she crossed from what Steve spied might be command center to the kitchen. “But this is a personal issue that you will need to deal with.”

“Okay, so,” Steve said. This was not his forte. “Where are they?”

“Thor’s with them. He’s actually pretty good at this Guide thing,” Clint said. He pointed over his shoulder to the far ‘room’ of the large underground bunker.

Steve studied the group as they stood around the counter and waited. He should talk with Bucky - *God, it had been years, decades even.* That last moment he actually saw Bucky as he fell from the train etched a hole in his heart so deep and wide Steve never thought it would heal. But now he had a chance to – because he could apologize, talk to Bucky. As he focused on his old friend, something deep and profound in his eyes halted Steve. How could he waltz back into Bucky’s life and expect nothing to be changed? When he looked at how Natasha and Bucky interacted – it was intimate – a wash of embarrassment came over Steve.

“I’ll talk to them,” Steve said and started toward the room. It was Natasha that stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“I think that can wait. Maybe you should talk to Bucky, first,” she said and then nodded to Bucky.
When Steve acknowledged Bucky this time, he recognized a fear in his friend’s expression that he’d only seen on infrequent occasions – those times married up with events that happened to be when Steve was sick. With a nod of his own, Steve agreed. “Where can we talk in private?” He didn’t want an audience for this – not for this at all.

Clint indicated what Steve had assumed was the command station. “Through there, you’ll find a door. Walk down the corridor to the private rooms.”

“There’s more?” Steve asked.

“A whole lot more,” Bruce said and continued to chop away at the vegetables with such vigor Steve had to wonder what they’d ever done to him.

Bucky shrugged and, with a last touch to Natasha, said, “Come on, better get this over with.”

Now, that didn’t sound promising. Steve followed. Bucky went to the door as if Steve was forcing him, not looking back. Steve took in none of the surroundings, a skill he’d developed over his time as Captain America. His lack of assessment paralleled his numbness and fear. As they approached it, Steve said in a low voice, “If you don’t want to do this now-.”

“No,” Bucky said as he twisted the door knob. “Let’s talk, Stevie.”

It almost sounded like home and Steve’s heart skipped a beat. He felt his cheeks warm and he bowed his head, trying to suppress a smile. “Okay.”

They walked to the far end of the corridor. It seemed like they’d walked back in time. Bucky always had the wider stride and Steve struggled to keep up, except for when his friend consciously made the effort to slow himself down. Bucky was like that – always on fire, ready to meet the world, to go to the future as he’d once said to Steve. Now, here they were in the future and so very different than before – their innocence eaten by war and time. Steve wondered if they were truly the same people or had somehow transformed into strangers. That scared him most of all, that his best friend – the person he’d loved as a brother all those years ago – might not be even a tiny bit the same.

When the entered into the private room with its bare cot and blank walls, the gray paint closed off everything else even the beating of his heart. The words, all the words fell out of his mouth and he lost them. Gone. What could he say? What did he say? At that moment, he never missed Peggy more – even though Thor had taken her place as Guide no one could truly be Peggy Carter to him. No one.

“Buck.”

“Hey.” His hair obscured his eyes and he kept his gaze focused downward.

“Buck,” Steve said again, and he found himself crossing the few steps that separated them and he encompassed Bucky in his arms. “I missed you so damned much.”

Bucky remained frozen, still for long seconds, but then tentatively raised his arms and gently brought Steve into his embrace as well. The feel of Bucky in his arms brought back memories of the last time they embraced – right before he’d left Steve and shipped out. Tears stung his eyes as he hung onto Bucky and then buried his face in his neck. The soul waves pulsed a new beat as if finally coming into resonance. Bucky shuddered against Steve but didn’t fight it – in fact it felt as if he welcomed it.

When they broke apart, Steve didn’t bother to wipe away the tears that streaked his face because he saw the same tracks on Bucky’s cheeks. Steve could speak a thousand years and still not express his feelings or catch up with everything that they were to one another. Bucky smiled – weakly at him
and then showed him his wrist.

“So soul pack, huh?”

“Yes,” Steve said and sniffled as he looked at the brand on Bucky’s flesh. “Sorry, I-.” He hissed. “Nate keeps telling me to not apologize, but I feel like I should every time it happens without the other person’s consent.”

Consent must be a huge issue to Bucky. Steve waited, and Bucky kept his face hidden by staring down at the mark on his wrist. “Hey why don’t we sit?” Steve gestured to the bed.

Bucky shuffled over to the bed and sat with a heavy sigh. After a few moments as Steve took the seat next to him but left room between them, Bucky said, “I don’t blame you, Steve. You got nothing to worry about.”

“Blame is a powerful word, Buck,” Steve said and folded his hands in front of him. He could ask why Bucky went after the twins or why he never came to Steve after their bond set in place. Instead he let Bucky take the lead.

“I just want you to know that I know you,” Bucky said and glanced at Steve – didn’t hold his gaze. “I know you would feel guilty for what happened. I know you do. I can feel it even now.”

Steve gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. He tried the Mantra to quell the seeping of his feelings through the bond, but doing it felt disingenuous. He hung his head. “Sorry, Buck. I can’t. I’m so sorry.” It wasn’t Bucky’s responsibility to take care of Steve – not anymore. “It’s not your responsibility. We’re not kids anymore. You need -.”

“I need you to let me feel normal,” Bucky said. “I got a long way to go. I got things in my head that I can’t even formulate words for. I know I’m not even close to who you think I am.” He shook his head when Steve went to protest. “I’m not. I can buy fucking plums all day long and I’m not who you think I am.”

“You did,” Steve said. “It wasn’t you.”

Bucky grimaced. “But I still did it. All of it. You have to respect that Steve. And you have to know, I could do it again.”

“Wh-what?” The chaotic soul waves from Bucky crested as they hit Steve – an energy pulse so powerful and potent it shocked him and he clenched his jaw to brace himself, but it didn’t matter. He still toppled, pitching forward off the bed. Bucky’s metal hand caught him and righted him. “What? What was that?”

Bucky swallowed hard and said, “It’s me. Steve, you gotta understand. I’m not the same person. Not anymore. I’m never going to be. You have to know that.”

“It doesn’t matter. We can fix this. There are ways to fix this,” he said, and he wondered if he was only saying the words to comfort himself more than his friend.

Bucky held Steve’s hand as if he never wanted to let go. “I hope there is, but you have to accept that there just might not be-.”

“You’re part of a pack now, Bucky.” Steve jumped up as if commanding the room would allow him to control the situation. “As part of the pack, we can help stabilize you. We can do these things now. You should have been there when Clint -.” He stopped. “The one with the bow?” Bucky nodded and gestured for him to move on. “Clint was nearly comatose, and we brought him back. Bruce
healed him, and I was there. It was phenomenal. We can heal you, I know we can.”

“How? How do you wipe away decades of conditioning? I think differently. I walk into a room, I immediately know the lay of the land. Just in this simple room there are 37 different ways I can kill you. Do you understand, Steve? This isn’t just something you play with.” Bucky stood up and the brawn of his muscles and shoulders, the way the metal gears of his arm whined shadowed over everything Steve knew about him.

“We’ll find a way. We can,” Steve replied. His heart wanted to burst out of his chest. A ringing sounded in his head. “Seventy years is nothing. Listen, everything changed for me. I thought I could never love anyone. Never be with anyone. And that’s not true. I just had to wipe away everything I learned. Sure it took time, but I’m there now. I-.”

“You’re in love?” Bucky asked. “I thought for sure-.” He stopped and blinked a few times. “Who? I felt something along the soul waves. I knew you were close to some of the pack members. I just didn’t know them all and I couldn’t figure it out. Not really. Who?”

“I-.” Steve stopped as the dreamscape reared its ugly memories. “We’re not here to talk about that. Not here. We should focus on you and what you need.”

“What I need,” Bucky mumbled, and his gaze dropped downward to the floor. He stood stock still for several seconds until he looked up again and asked, “It’s not a woman, is it?”

“Buck.”

“It isn’t. I can feel it. It’s all over you,” Bucky said and squeezed his eyes closed. He fisted his hands. The struggle he underwent pounded out of him. He tried to control it. “God, Steve.” His eyes flashed open. “You know what they called that back then? You know that it was illegal? That you’re a damned-.” He stopped and choked on the words.

“Buck. It’s different now. Please, listen to me. It’s not about me.”

“For Christ’s sake, Steve. You’re god damned Captain America. How the fuck-.”

A rapping on the door stopped them and then it swung open to reveal Natasha. “You couldn’t wait a day to tell him?”

Steve flinched at her sharp edged words. He had no excuse. “It’s not like I can hide it.”

“No, you can’t. But you could be sensible some time, Rogers,” Natasha snapped. “Come.”

Steve hesitated. He shouldn’t let her boss him around especially at such a sensitive juncture, but the fact remained that Natasha knew this version of Bucky much better than he did. Bucky threw Steve a glance and it felt like he’d lobbed a fast ball right into his gut. He stomped away, knocking past Natasha and going to the corridor. Natasha waited and when he was out of earshot said, “It took you how long to accept your own orientation? Don’t expect it to be overnight for him.”

“I’m not,” Steve said, but he knew that was a lie. He was even lying to himself now. Having Bucky back in his life meant the world to him. He’d made a life in the 21st century, but his roots were long and strong in a distant past. Denying that only led to failure.

Natasha placed a hand on his forearm. “I get it. It’s hard. He needs time.”

“You seemed to have taken up where you left off.” That was cruel. He hissed at himself. “Sorry, I don’t even know if that’s true or not.”
“Everything isn’t what you want it to be, Steve,” Natasha said. “He’s not the person that you knew. Not anymore. He hasn’t been in seventy years.”

“The core is there. The good man is there. I know he is,” Steve replied. “Reaching him, making him understand…”

“Understand what? What you need him to understand? That you need him to accept who you are? Or that you accept who he is now?” Natasha asked her eyes trained on him like a predator about to devour her prey.

“You don’t sound like a confidant,” Steve said. Again, he shot one from the hip.

“Let’s face it, Rogers, you’re not always acting like a leader, either,” Natasha replied and with that lash, she walked out of the room and down the hall. He watched her go, feeling the sting of her words and knowing he deserved every syllable of it. God, what had he been thinking? Expecting Bucky to be a man he’d known so many years ago was ridiculous, but at the same time was it stupid to want to hope?

He left the private quarters and headed back to the main area of the underground bunker. As he approached the command center he heard Hill speaking. “I don’t know. Wilson said to be on the lookout – that Tony took off and was headed here.”

Steve walked into the room. He studied Maria’s expression and then turned to the pack members gathered around her console. Multiple screens hung from mental supports – a skeleton of rods with many views to the outside world. She sat on a rolling chair and turned to acknowledge him as he faced the rest of the group. Bruce had abandoned his food preparation to lean against the partition sectioning off the command center. Clint stood in the corner with his arms crossed and Steve wondered where his charges, the twins, happened to be. Thor and Natasha stood next to the console. There was no sign of Bucky.

“Tony’s coming here?” Steve asked. They didn’t need that at all. Steve hadn’t even had time to talk with the twins. And Bucky, he had a long way to go with Bucky. When he noted that Bucky wasn’t in the room, he peered around the corner to find him. “Where is Bucky?”

“He went to get some fresh air,” Natasha said and then snapped her fingers at him. “Hey, Leader, focus here.”

Now that was uncalled for – He nearly sent a retort her way, but Bruce cleared his throat and said, “If Tony’s coming here then we have to do something about Barnes and the twins. The memories that Barnes shared with Tony the last time sent him into a spiral. With the twins…”

“Yes, and Wanda tapped into his darkest fears,” Clint added. “It was a defense mechanism, but I’m not so certain that Tony will see it that way. Not with his current state of mind.”

“What do you know about his state of mind?” Steve asked. It wasn’t Clint who answered but Thor.

“Our great man of iron has been captured by the past,” Thor said and clenched his fist as if he held Mjolnir. “We must ease the blow and help him accept what has happened.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Steve said and glared at Natasha. She arched a brow. The unspoken question and truth weighed between them. He accepted his label and rubbed at the brand on his wrist. “I need you, Clint, to go out there and give me some eyes in the sky. Thor, I’m not putting you in the sky because I don’t know Tony’s mindset right now. I don’t want a knock down right now. We have to ease him into acceptance. Once we get Tony to at least disarm – that is take off the armor
– then you can step in.” Steve turned back to Bruce and Natasha. “Bruce I need you to stay here and keep the twins out of the way. I do not want them mixing in here. We need a clear slate. Natasha, you need to go out and find Bucky. Keep him at a distance so that Thor and I can get Tony to take off the armor and sit down and talk.”

“Can I help?” Hill asked.

“Keep comms open,” Steve said. “I don’t want anyone armed. I want us to go in as a pack, as a family. This is one of our members who is upset.”

“No weapons?” Natasha asked and crossed her arms. “That’s bold and it might be stupid.”

“I want Tony to know we are not ganging up on him.”

“I’m keeping the stingers.”

“I’ll concede that. We might need it,” Steve said. He went back to Maria. “Make sure that we have a clear view of everything going on. Send it through the comms. Only one pack member actually needs to hear it, doesn’t matter who. If someone loses a comm, the other pack members can warn them one way or the other through the soul bond.”

“Got it,” Maria said.

“Get comms,” Steve ordered. “And let’s go.” He would have the team spread out. He would wait for Tony to arrive and try and talk to him. They’d left things on a good note, so he had to assume that Tony would be willing to talk.

After he placed the comm in his ear, Steve went to the surface. Clint and Natasha rode the elevator with him. Clint didn’t have his bow and Natasha looked a little more than pissed that she was disarmed. He addressed it. “This is Tony. I don’t want an altercation.”

“You won’t get one from me,” Natasha said. “But I will defend the pack.”

As they left the elevator and walked into the shabby cottage, Steve scanned the sky for any sign of Iron Man through the holes in the roof. Clint jogged out of the ruin down house and Natasha stopped Steve with her outstretched arm.

“I don’t mean to be rude. I just want you to understand you can’t expect Bucky to be who you once knew. I also know that he can’t expect the same of you. I am working on that with him. It’s only been less than a day. Give it time.” She didn’t give him space to respond, but instead followed the trail out of the house and toward the wooded area. Steve stepped over the broken boards in the floor of the cabin and went outside, scanning the thick forest around him for any signs of approach. Both Bucky and Iron Man were out there, and they were headed for a disaster.

The whole of the forest around him silenced as he reached deep inside to search for his pack mates. He strung out his soul lines, looking for Bucky, trying to offer him solace and understanding while at the same time he reached for Tony along different bonds, tying him in close and offering him a place to call home. He stood outside of the cabin, vulnerable, like an offering in many ways. He didn’t care. The danger was slight. He had his pack around him, supporting him, offering him waves of comfort and strength. He threw these feelings outward to try and bring in his wayward pack members.

A bird chirped in the distance and Steve listened to it. A brook not far off from the cabin gurgled and ran, the current a song in the forest. He heard the bugs crawling through the underbrush and the life around him vibrating along the lines of the soul. Every life, every breath strengthened it, empowered
it. He brought it together to weave an invitation to his Brother, to his Beloved.

“Steve?”

He jerked to the side, nearly slipping and falling on the wet leaves. Bucky stood to the side of the cabin. His eyes looked bruised as if he’d been crying. At that moment, Steve saw so many things superimposed over Bucky. He saw the soldier who walked by his side and protected him all the years of the war, he witnessed the rage of the Winter Soldier as he slammed a fist into Steve’s face, he saw a lost soul wandering Europe and beyond looking for harbor, he saw a man who became all these things at once. None of them could be dismissed. Bucky was a good man and an assassin. Steve had to come to terms with those truths.

“Bucky,” Steve said and took a step toward him. At the same time his comm crackled.

“Incoming due west,” Clint said over the communications link.

“Iron Man has neutralized all aerial traps,” Maria chimed in.

Of course he had, Tony was that smart. Steve bent his neck to look up over the trees and the red and gold flashed against the pitiful sun and cloud laden sky. “Tony,” Steve murmured and then the armor set down with a thump that reverberated through the forest floor. The birds went quiet.

“No one act,” Steve commanded. He heard a quick exhale from Natasha but managed to ignore it as he faced Iron Man. Bucky stood behind Steve, only about a meter away. “Tony.”

The faceplate dissolved, and Tony glared at Steve, the anger ebbing off him like the incoming tide. “You left.”

“I had to. Thor asked me to come,” Steve said and raised his hands. “This is your pack, Tony. No one he-.”

“That is not part of my pack. That is a monstrosity,” Tony said and pointed at Bucky over Steve’s shoulder.

“Let’s settle down,” Steve said and spread out his arms to keep everyone at bay. “You know that Bucky is not responsible. You’ve said it yourself.”

“I don’t know what I know,” Tony replied and the images – the feelings – of the Winter Soldier crushing his mother’s windpipe blasted through the soul bonds. It felt as if Steve was there, as if the astral projections of the memory showed it to him, made him experience it. Every horrible second of it. A gag of revulsion and he snapped his attention to Bucky, only seeing the murderer and not the man, not his friend.

“I did it, I know I did it,” Bucky said as the images assaulted all of them. “I remember each and every one. All of it.”

“You bastard!” Tony yelled and stalked closer, only Steve’s body stopped him. The anger emanating from Tony tainted the air. “You’re not my Brother. Do you understand me? You’re a murderer, a killer.”

Steve grabbed hold of Tony and used all his strength to keep him from charging Bucky. “Tony, you know better than this. You understand that he was used, abused.” Even as he spoke the tears stung his eyes, though Steve didn’t know who he was crying for - Tony or Bucky. “Please, stop.”

From the comms the distant voice of Hill. “Thor would like to come up. Clint is reporting a
“No, no!” Steve said but didn’t have a chance to hit the comm to relay his message. He had to hope the soul bonds clearly showed his intentions, and that Clint relayed his intention to Hill. “I can handle this.”

“Can you, Steve?” Bucky called from behind him. “You know I did it. Why do you care so much? Why do you want to change things? This is who I am.”

With all the power and force he could muster, Steve captured Iron Man while he twisted around to confront Bucky. “I know who you really are. I know you.” God, was he making a mistake? Natasha told him not to push it. That he had to learn to accept what Bucky had become, but he couldn’t do that without acknowledging that part of Bucky would always be Hydra. “I know you.”

“I don’t. I don’t even know you,” Bucky said. His voice sounded strangled as if every word fought to get out, to push past his training. “Look at you. You’re -you’re with him. You let him fuck you.”

Christ, not now. The soul bond echoed the flash of rage and pain from Tony before the gears of the suit moved. Before he knew it, Tony tossed him aside and launched himself at Bucky, who, with his metal arm, warded off the attack.

“We need help!” Clint yelled through the comm line.

“Coming in,” Natasha said, and Steve heard the clear zip through the air of a stinger being thrown. It hit Bucky’s arm but did little to stop him. He only held on through the electrical shock as it was carried to the armor. Tony screamed out, but the suit flared with a whirl of energy. Before Steve could tell her to stop, Natasha hurtled another stinger and it hit Tony square on the chest.

He called out, “Thor! We need Thor!”

The arch of electricity crawled out like a carrion crow’s claws, scraping at both Bucky and Tony. The armor screeched in protest, but Bucky fell away, stumbling against the pain of the shock. Steve stepped in between them, warning off Bucky but at the same time trying to spot Natasha as she lurked in the wooded area around the cabin’s entrance.

“Nat, stop!” Steve said.

The electrical shock raced over the armor, slamming into the arc reactor and lighting it as if it were kerosene to a fire. “Jesus!” Tony cried out as his head contorted backward and the unibeam charged. “Can’t stop!”

“Clear out! Clear out!” Steve yelled, and Bucky lurched forward as if to attack Tony while at the same time Iron Man grabbed at the chest plating.

“I’m stopping it, I’m stopping it,” Tony said, and the faceplate covered his head. Steve heard a muffled curse as he held Bucky away from the beam. “It’s fucked. Steve-.”

An arc of electricity like lightning crackled over the armor as Steve called again for Hill to alert Thor – asking for help. If anyone knew what the hell to do about lightning it would be the god of thunder. The Iron Man armor went rigid and all sound – the revving of the charge, the whirl of the gears – silenced. After a few seconds, Steve eased his arms from around Bucky and said, “Tony?”

“Son of a -.”

It shot into the forest, setting leaves on fire. Bucky jumped to yank Steve away as the unibeam
blasted like a cannon again. It struck Bucky’s metal arm causing him to crumple to the wet ground. Steve followed him, catching him as he murmured out a gasp of pain. A sense of nausea and vertigo came over Steve as he smelt the burnt flesh and charred metal. Thor and Natasha appeared as Clint hopped down from his perch. The Iron Man armor finally went dead, and Tony yelled for someone to help him get the damned thing off him. Thor easily ripped the faceplate and chestplate away. It was enough that Tony switched the manual release and the rest of the suit collapsed.

“Jesus Christ! Fuck!” Tony said as he raced to join Steve with Bucky.

Everything narrowed as Steve hung over his friend. Steve knelt by Bucky’s side, hand cradling his neck as the pain shot through him and he quaked from the seizure. As Steve watched his friend laying in agony, he shook against him. Tears formed in his eyes and he shivered. It grew colder and colder and he held onto Bucky as Tony stumbled to a stop and dropped to his knees beside their Brother.

“Shit, no.” Tony whispered as images of Steve as a sickly kid, as a man with no hope popped up for all of them to witness. The memories were a flood and Steve couldn’t remember the Mantra to stop it. He couldn’t remember anything at all. His chest tightened as he watched Bucky close his eyes. His heart gripped his chest like a fist. He fought for each and every breath as he knelt beside his brother.

“No. No. No.” He heard Tony say and grab onto Bucky’s flesh and blood hand. “Don’t you do this. Don’t you leave him now! He just fucking found you.” The words meant the world to Steve even as the sight of Tony leaning over his friend grayed out. He swayed as he cradled a shivering Bucky in his arms.

“Steve?” Natasha said. “Fuck! Steve!” A scuffle of motion from Clint and Thor but Steve couldn’t follow it. It was too much, too fast, too distant.

Steve gazed up at Natasha and her face was a ruin of emotions. But she wasn’t still, she was at his side, holding her hands to his shoulder and his back. He wanted to say ‘what’ but the words locked up in his throat.

“Steve!” Tony dropped Bucky’s hand and reached out to his Beloved. His hand came away wet with blood.

“He’s been hit,” Natasha said as Steve collapsed into her arms. He saw the gray skies above and the flash of lightning surround them. It started to rain as he lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Please be aware that Bucky as a man who grew up at the beginning of the 20th century has some old fashioned views of same sex relationships. He does have some homophobia in this chapter - just like Steve had toward self throughout the rest of the story. I tried to make it realistic and not just a easy fix.

Tony is still dealing with the memories of his mother's death. It isn’t that easy to get over.

Chapter 16 will be posted near the end of October. Sorry! Still working on my BB.
Universal Truths

Chapter Summary

The pack must try and save Steve, but can they when he's determined to sacrifice himself for the good of the pack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER 16

Maria Hill was a miracle worker. Somehow, she managed to alert Fury and get a Quin Jet to their location. It couldn’t land in the clearing where the cabin was located, but it landed not a half mile to the east. Thor flew both Bucky and Steve to the transport. Tony trashed the Iron Man armor, tossing it into the back of the jeep Clint produced from – where Tony didn’t know. Natasha and Clint got into the jeep and told him to hurry up. He got in though his whole body felt numb. He couldn’t remember the reason he’d followed Steve in the first place. The ride to the jet felt like it took a million years and he knew Steve didn’t have the time to wait for them, not with a fucking hole in his back and a burn on his shoulder to boot.

He had nothing to say when they entered the field and a jet waited. He wanted to rage that the idiots waited for them instead of bringing Steve to the Tower immediately for emergency care. When he raced up the rampway though, he didn’t find either Barnes or Steve in the jet. A blonde headed woman sat at the controls while Natasha waited for him near the rampway. The pilot had a headset on and whirled her index finger in the air as she directed, “Get it in line. We don’t have much time. The other jet is well on its way.”

Natasha indicated a seat and Tony slumped down into it. He buckled in as Clint took the co-pilot’s seat. Tony had expected Fury to be the pilot, but then he suspected that Nick took the first jet and transported the injured immediately. The flight gave Tony something he desperately wanted to throw out of the jet. Time. It gave him enough time to mull over what the fuck had just happened. He could blame the whole fiasco on Natasha. The armor had been damaged not only during the training exercise but also during the attack on the Hydra base in Sokovia. It hadn’t been serious damage, but it was enough to fry out the electrical when Natasha tossed her stingers at him. While he thought he repaired the damage from the training exercise, he’d never tested it to ensure that a power surge wouldn’t affect it in a negative way. Now he knew. Normally a power surge would have left him with more energy that he knew what to do with, but this time the suit couldn’t handle a simple stinger. He would toast the whole thing when they got back to the Tower.

Maybe it was his own guilt and fear that kept him from thinking about Steve or even asking for a status as they flew to the Tower. His mind circled around the suit and trying to find out what else was wrong with it. Why it happened, what was next on the agenda for suit upgrades. Somewhere along the way, he found out the pilot was Sharon Carter – an ex-SHIELD agent. From her conversation with Clint, he gathered she interviewed with the CIA to join their ranks. It never occurred to Tony to worry about what happened to all the non-Hydra agents from SHIELD. He thought of Maria Hill who Pepper had hired for Stark Industries, and who seemed to do double duty with Fury – on his spy missions. Who knew what resources Fury had at his disposal.
By the time they landed on the Tower pad, Tony managed to avoid thinking about what the hell he would encounter when he went to med-bay. Briefly, he considered escaping to his workshop, but the truth of the matter was he couldn’t, not from this, not from his Beloved. Natasha waited for Tony to unbuckle and walked with him out of the jet. Her expression, grave, fixed in stone. He should be pissed at her. If she hadn’t decided to intervene this wouldn’t have happened. He said nothing. The air shouldn’t have chilled him, but nothing touched his numb brain as they walked into the Tower and headed directly to the bank of elevators. Without a word they entered the elevator and JARVIS brought them down to the med level. As they exited the car, it occurred to Tony that Barnes – who he specifically banned from being in his house – was now a guest and being treated by Stark medical person. Under his breath he cursed but said nothing out loud. Right now, he had to focus on Steve, even though this brain danced away from the subject by adding more fuel to the fire involving Barnes.

Thor stood in the center of the waiting area. Mjolnir had been dropped on the floor next to him, but enough in the path of nurses and doctors that they had to step over it or around it. One of the nurses was standing next to Thor, explaining something to him but he acted too distracted to answer. Natasha took control almost instantly.

“Thor. The hammer. Move it. Now.” She sounded strong, confident but when Tony really concentrated on her, he recognized the dark circles, the bleary look to her. He should tell her this wasn’t her fault. It was, but it wasn’t. It was his fault. It was Bucky’s fault. It was fucking someone’s fault.

Thor startled and smiled at the nurse as he bent down to pick up the hammer. “Sorry.”

“What do we know?” Natasha asked.

“Our Brother, James, is in dire shape. The arm was directly attached to nerves. They don’t have the technology to repair it,” Thor said and then turned to the nurse as if to confirm he’d reported the stasis correctly.

“We’re trying to give him pain meds but he’s a little out of control right now. I was coming out to ask for assistance in keeping him immobile,” the nurse said – Tony noticed her name tag said Cathy. “We’re calling in experts as well to help with the neurological pain.”

Immediately, Thor stepped up to the task. “I will help you with our Brother.”

Tony cringed at the term but kept his outward appearance immobile. Before Cathy led Thor away, Tony managed to a little grunt that stopped her. His whole being locked like someone had glued him together and he’d never move again. Through sheer willpower, Tony tore away at the overwhelming sensation of paralysis and said, “What about St-Steve? Captain Rogers?”

Cathy eyed Natasha as Tony awaited her answer. She grimaced but answered, “The doctors will update you. I haven’t been in the room to work with Captain Rogers. I’m sorry.” She glanced at Thor and Tony glimpsed a slight intimidation on the nurse’s part. Thor recognized it as well. The demigod gestured for her to lead the way as he started to tell a story about his childhood.

“Do you like snakes? Well, I do-.“ His voice trailed off as Cathy guided him to the room where Barnes was being treated.

Tony watched Thor leave, the lightheartedness of his story lost to distance. His mind juddered like a boat without mooring, hitting the dock and then being lost to the ocean. He knew he should query about Steve again, find out what was happening, but his mind failed him. He couldn’t anchor, no matter what he did. Clint stepped closer as Natasha reached out to Tony.
“Come on. We’ll find out how Steve is and then get some coffee.” Natasha didn’t let go of Tony’s hand which should have jarred him. She wasn’t the touchy feely kind of person. But her grasp of his hand gave him the anchor he needed. He sheepishly followed her, now like a duckling after its mother.

“You are not having motherly feelings about me, Stark,” Natasha hissed but never looked back as they made their way through the medbay. Clint snorted. Tony frowned but cleared out his head. He was surprised she read his feelings so concisely.

Clint pointed to their interlocked hands. “Apparently during emotional upset, it’s easier to get direct feelings.”

“How do you know?” Tony asked.

“Been doing my homework. I thought you were a big advocate of doing the homework,” Clint remarked as they finally stepped up to the critical care unit.

In the Tower medical center, there were two critical care bays. One was currently occupied by Barnes. It was in the opposite wing of the medical center. Yet, they could still hear the frequent screams and thumps coming from the room. Tony could only imagine what was going on. A brainwashed soldier, arm shot off, and nerve pain enough to set him mentally on fire – that was enough to know. Tony felt no compulsion to find out more – not now.

As they approached the second critical care unit, Bruce walked out of the rooms. Bruce cleared his throat and answered their questions without prompting.

“He’s resting. He lost a lot of blood but the serum’s making short work of that issue. The wounds are closing at an amazing rate. It shouldn’t be too long before he’s upgraded from critical.”

Tony released a breath he hadn’t know he was holding, and Natasha freed his hand as she inhaled and exhaled over and over. Clint was the only one of their trio who managed to formulate words to respond, “Do you think Tony could see him?”

“He can,” Bruce said but put his hand up to block Tony’s path. “He’s not conscious. The doctors say he’s in a very deep coma. They can barely get any upper brain function read out.”


Bruce explained, “No, not as far as we know. He wasn’t exposed to an electrical shock, but he isn’t responding to outside stimuli. The monitors barely register brain function.”

Tony had to pause to let the enormity of that sink in. No higher brain function? He might have killed his soulmate. His hands shook, his heart pulsed in his ears so that it was hard to even hear himself speak. The logical part of his brain took over as he sank further and further away from reality as if the waves that wash over Steve and drown him threatened Tony as well. Yet, he still remained rational. “Shouldn’t the serum have taken care of it all. It shouldn’t have resulted in a coma?” He looked to Bruce to confirm his assumption.

“We don’t know,” Bruce replied. “The doctors are still running some tests to make sure they didn’t miss anything.”

Tony put his hand to his forehead and spun on his heel. Blinking, he tried to banish the tears forming in his eyes. What the hell was happening? Why was it happening? The sinking feeling in his chest dragged him into a pit, an abyss of numbness that shuddered through him. A slow earthquake
crumbed his emotions and even as the group debated Steve’s condition, the words meant nothing to him. All he heard over and over was that Steve was in critical condition.

“Tony.” He heard his name called, but he refused to respond as the vacuum of fear and horror emptied him. “Tony!”


“Do we know if there’s anyone at the safe house with the twins?”

Tony snapped his attention on Bruce. “I don’t fucking know! Why the hell would I know? I’m here, waiting to find out if I fucking killed my soul mate.”

Bruce put up his hands in surrender. “I’m just trying to get a hold of the situation.”

Natasha answered, “Maria is still there and Fury took the other Quin Jet back to the safe house to help out.”

“Great,” Clint grunted. “That will go over well.” He huffed. With a heave of his breath, he said, “I’ll go back.” He touched Natasha’s shoulder. “Keep me up to date, okay?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Clint.”

“This isn’t in your ledger, you know,” he spoke quietly but Tony still overheard him.

She looked over at Tony. “Yeah it is. Better mine than his.”

Those words sunk Tony’s heart. Natasha always seemed so distant and cold, like steel and ice. Yet, her words, the way to offered to shield him from the responsibility thawed her in his eyes.

He found his voice. “Don’t. It’s my fault. I screwed up.” He thought of waking up only to find out that Steve wasn’t next to him, wasn’t in the penthouse, wasn’t even in the damned Tower. As his anxiety ratcheted up, even JARVIS failed to calm him. The AI suggested time in the workshop, recommended against leaving the Tower. If he’d ever heard JARVIS beg, it had been that morning. But then he recalled the betrayal and the hurt that encompassed him when he’d heard that Steve had gone off after Bucky. Sam tried to break it to him and soften the blow. He failed. It still stung. It hurt like shit.

He added, “We screwed up.”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“All of us,” Tony said and swallowed. He hated to kick a team mate when he was down but the fact remained that Steve snuck out and left him to deal with the revelation. Truth be told, Steve may have concluded that he’d spent enough time and that it handling the rest of the pack had been in order, but Tony resented the fact that he’d left with nary a word. Tony pressed his fingers into his eyes. Since when did he say nary? Thor was getting into his head.

“Let’s not think about that now,” Bruce said. He touched Tony’s arm. So rarely did Bruce reach out and make physical contact that Tony understood the profundity of the gesture. Dropping his hands, he looked at Bruce. “Why don’t you go and see Steve now?”

Tony agreed silently and slipped past Bruce to enter the hospital room. Seeing Steve still and silent in the critical care unit ripped a hole in Tony’s chest. There were simple monitors around Steve – surrounding him with their useless readouts. With all of the best medical knowledge at their fingertips
no one could answer Tony’s question. Why wouldn’t Steve wake up? What was wrong that he laid in the bed as if cursed to sleep forever. It chilled Tony to the bones to think about it. The seventy year nap Steve had felt like a dark shadow haunting them. Tony sat by Steve’s bedside as the medical staff came and went with no explanations of why this was happening or what could be done to stop it. In the deep corners of Tony’s soul Steve fell farther away as if the soul bond constricted and dried. Tony shuddered at the feeling, knowing something inside of him was dying. It terrified him.

When the staff left him alone with Steve, Tony tried to say the Soul Mantra, tried to sing it out loud and repeat it. He hoped that some part of Steve might hear it, be disturbed enough by it, might anchor him in the here and now. It made no difference. Steve’s touch, that link between them drifted further away. Tony rubbed at his face and found tears staining his cheeks. He stepped up to the bed and touched Steve’s hand.

Cold.

Like death.

He looked up at Steve’s placid face, his features undisturbed by the horror happening within them. Their soul bond weakened, dessicating away from Tony even away from Steve. What was happening? He needed to call for Wong, or someone to help them. If Steve left, if he no longer connected to Tony did that mean the pack was in danger as well? Why would Steve do this to them? Tony squeezed his hand.

“You have to know.” He spoke with a ruined voice. “You have to know that I didn’t want to hurt anyone. Not even him. I was just-” He stopped, and he couldn’t continue. What had his purpose been to follow Steve? Toward what end? “I didn’t want you to leave for him. I didn’t want you to leave.” He wiped away the tears, angry at himself for crying, weeping for himself. “I needed you to stay. You don’t know. You don’t know how it was. I cried for my mother.” He heaved in a breath and then his body shook as he released it. “I cried so hard when she died. But I never-” Tony paused and fought to get the words out. “I didn’t cry for him. Never. I hated Howard. He spent my entire youth searching for you, saying how much better of a man you were. I hated you. I hated him. When he died, I was glad to be rid-” He sobbed. “Rid.” Tony brought Steve’s hand to his lips, kissing it. “Please don’t leave me.”

He used his other hand to cover his eyes. He couldn’t do this. Mourning. He loathed it. The resentment of the dead. The wish for more time, just more time to fix things. To say the things he always wanted to say. The regret. Regret for not spending the time he had better. He could have done so much more. He could have stopped being such a brat and figured out why his father dedicated so much time to finding Steve. He could have stopped ignoring his mother’s pleas to at least try and connect. He could have yielded to his mother and just stopped fighting with his father at every opportunity, wrecking all their time together. Death only emphasized his own inadequacies.

Everything he offered now, only emphasized his inadequacies. He kissed Steve’s knuckles and then placed his beloved’s hand back on the cool white sheets of the bed. “Why are you there. Wherever you are? Why?” Tony choked back the rest of the questions, the accusations. One of the things he learned while mourning his parents had been the tendency to get angry, to accuse the dead of leaving. But Steve wasn’t dead, yet the curling and drying of their bond scared him enough that it roiled his defensiveness. He needed to walk away, to get some fresh air.

“I’m sorry I can’t sit here. I can’t hold vigil for you. Sitting here on my hands with nothing to do, I can’t do this. I can’t do nothing while you tear away from me. Why are you doing this? Why are you leaving me?” Even as he spoke, he heard the hysteria ramp up in his voice. He needed to leave. The
urgency to flee overwhelmed him and he stumbled backward, away from the bed – the stillness of Steve – the grayness of his features. He turned and started out of the critical care room only to bump into Bruce.

“Hey. Hey!” Bruce said. “I called Wong-.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Tony said and the surprise on Bruce’s face should have stopped him. Nothing could stop him now, not even the Hulk. “I gotta get out of here.”

“Tony!” Bruce called as Tony escaped the room.

When he left the room he collided with Natasha and Sam who stood at the entrance like guardians. Before they said a word, he raised his hand and shook his head. He stepped around them without uttering a word of explanation. He didn’t have anything to say. He had no lengthy words to give them that would clarify his actions – at this point his own need to flee confounded him as well.

“Tony!” Natasha said as Tony rushed down the corridor. He didn’t look behind him. He heard the door to Steve’s room open.

“Tony?” Bruce called. “Did you figure something out? What’s going on?”

He had no answers. There was nothing to figure out. Nothing at all. He refused to turn around, to face his friends, his team, his pack. He needed space, so he raced away. When he turned the corner and out of their sights, Tony took to running to the elevators avoiding the medical staff and anyone who noticed him or called out to him. Getting to the elevators, he didn’t have to wait for one. JARVIS must have been monitoring his movements and the lift opened immediately as he approached. He entered, and the car closed without hesitation.

“Sir?”

“Just go. Go.” Tony fell against the back of the elevator, panting and sweating. Sweat ran down his temples, wetted his shirt. Yet, he shivered as he tried to catch his breath. The elevator started to move, going up toward the Tower’s penthouse apartment. He wanted to thank God, thank JARVIS for reading him so well. He stood, leaning really, against the back of the elevator, his body jolting and jumping as if he suffered a seizure. He cursed. “I just want to rest.”

It took no time at all to get to the penthouse. It felt like forever. The doors opened, and Tony staggered out like he suffered from the side effects of the paralytic that Stane once injected him with. His skin felt clammy. His hands shook. He stumbled across the floor, trying to get to the bedroom. His body rebelled, and he pitched over falling into the conversation area near the fireplace. Grabbing hold of the white couch that he’d picked out with Pepper over a year ago, Tony managed to climb up onto the couch. His body went limp. He tried to call out to JARVIS, to say something, but his words muffled in his throat. JARVIS didn’t query him. He stared up at the far away ceiling and realized Steve was so far away, too far. He shouldn’t have left, he should be at his Beloved’s side. Maybe Steve was dying, and this was what it felt like when the bond wilted and died along with him.

God, he should be at Steve’s side. What the hell was he doing? He was supposed to be a superhero, but he lost his courage. Seeing Steve still like death, gray like a ghost ate away at the last fiber of his strength. His body quaked, and he faded, his awareness flitting on the edges of his perception. In the distance he heard JARVIS calling to him, asking questions. He heard his own voice answering.

*No, I’m fine. I need to rest.*

It wasn’t true. He fought to open his eyes, to yell to JARVIS to get help, but his body answered to
some other alien force. Inwardly, he struggled, battled with the growing senses of futility. His body frozen. His limbs became unresponsive, heavy and nailed to his sides. Darkness not like sleep surrounded him. It haunted him. Even as he tried to get his eyes to open, the creeping darkness slipped around him like a hand cradling his entire body. He fumbled, trying to fight it. He swung and then with great heave fell off the couch. Tony woke.

A whispered wind answered him as if the penthouse was open to the night. Standing, he shivered and wanted JARVIS to close the expansive glass doors, but instead he turned, and a long hallway appeared. Everything else went to darkness like he stood on a stage and a spotlight beckoned him.

“What the fuck?” When he spun around on his heels, he saw only the pitch-black night. If he attempted to step away from the spotlight, the world adjusted, shifted and he was once again walking down the pathway of light. He had a choice. Fight it and go nowhere or go with it and find out what the hell was going on. Maybe he’d gone nuts?

He studied the light; in his mind he called it a beacon. He heard the distant sounds that reminded him of the hospital. Was he back in the critical care unit in his own Tower? Had JARVIS called for help? Did he have the heart attack he’d been fearing for years now and never articulated, even to himself? Was the light - *fuck* - was it heaven? People saw light when they were dying. He should go to the darkness, go back, but the light pulled.

Part of his soul yearned to go through the light, to see what it offered. Anytime he turned away from it, his heart ached and the tug in his chest to focus on the light intensified. He had no choice. He needed to follow it, to answer it. He walked toward the spotlight as it flickered. He heard a murmur as if doctors and nurses spoke. He tried to discover where the sounds were coming from and then he saw a nurse materialize from the shadows. She rushed past him but acted like she never saw him at all. He stopped and watched the darkness encompass her. She had been wearing a very out of date nursing uniform – with that peculiar little hat they used to wear all those years ago. She wore all white, down to her stockings and shoes. He flinched.

It wasn’t *where* was he, it was *when* was he.

*Damn.*

This wasn’t death. This was the dreamscape again. Tony shed all his reservations and hurried toward the light. The light meant Steve, the light tugged and pulled him because Steve beckoned him. He ran to the light. It danced away from him. He hurried through the darkness that stole ever closer and aimed toward the light. It flittered like snow flurries, a swirl of light that came and went.

“God damn it! I’m right here. Where are you?” Tony yelled, and the words echoed back to him.

“You, you, you…”

He stopped. “Steve!”

“Eve, eve, eve…”

He spun around, and the light whirled and settled only meters away. “Steve!” The echo died down and a nurse appeared from the shadows.

“Please, sir. Please. These patients are critical. They deserve your respect,” the nurse said and then the light spread out and the ward around him appeared.

“Holy shit,” Tony murmured, and the nurse only frowned before she walked away. He took in his surroundings. A ward of dying patients. It looked like something out of the movies, from the early
part of the last century, the 1930s. The beds were metal framed, the blankets were white and thin. Along with the nurse he just talked to nuns in white walked amongst the beds, taking care of the dying, offering comfort. Some sat down on little white stools next to the beds to say a Rosary along with the patient. Windows, over large, with clean panes, looked out to a courtyard below that Tony couldn’t discriminate the details. A bird, maybe a hawk, flew in the sky close to the windows. It opened its mouth to caw, but Tony never heard its voice.

Instead, his gaze fell upon the corner of the ward where a thin young man sat on the stool while he held the hand of a patient in the bed. His head bowed, and Tony distinguished small quiet sobs. He wept for the patient. The other patients faded from his view. He knew he should be looking for Steve amongst them, but the pain in his heart only increased when he laid eyes on the pair – the woman in the bed dying, the man at her side so clearly her son.

So clearly Steve.

“Oh Jesus,” Tony whispered. He’d read the stories of Captain America’s life. He usually skimmed over the early parts of the stories as a child, too impatient to get to the good stuff. The story of Steve Rogers before Project Rebirth seemed inconsequential to an eight-year-old boy bent on reading about his hero. He recalled from those small bits of information he retained that Steve’s mother died of tuberculosis when he was a young man before the war. He was left nearly destitute because of his own health problems, the Great Depression, and his inability to work manual labor. If it hadn’t been for Bucky, Steve may have died long before that the faithful day of Project Rebirth.

Bucky.

Tony hung his head. He pressed his hands into his eyes and said in a low voice almost to himself, “I get it now. I understand.”

When he looked up, he half hoped he would be back in his Tower, but he wasn’t. The low weeping broke the otherwise quietude of the ward. Tony inhaled, held it, and then walked toward the bed with Sara Rogers in it. Her son looked like wire bent at odd angles. Tony swore he could count every single vertebra sticking up through his too thin shirt.

Approaching the bed, Tony hesitated. What would he say to this Steve Rogers? How would he talk to him? Would Steve even know who he was? He stood there, observing Steve as he laid his head next to his mother and squeezed her hand. Sara spoke in rasping tones.

“You always get up. Always stand up.” She coughed, and blood streaked her chin. Steve only stayed silent by her side. His grief too much to bear, too much of a burden to offer any more comfort. “Don’t let — them. Don’t let them beat you down.” Sara shuddered. Sweat covered her gray face.

When Tony really concentrated on her he glimpsed a phantom speaking from beyond the grave. Of course, that was just ridiculous, but he stood there transfixed as she urged her son to succeed, to continue, to live.

“Ma.”

Plaintive and singular the word struck Tony right in the middle of his chest. The rest of the ward disappeared into the shadows.

Steve looked up at his mother. Standing behind Steve his face was hidden from Tony’s viewpoint. Steve leaned over and whispered to his mother. Her wan features brightened, and she smiled, deeply and warmly at her son. Raising a quaking hand, she touched her son’s face. A soft cry sounded as Steve said, “Ma.” He grasped her hand to his face. Her smile drifted away with her strength and then
she closed her eyes. Tony knew it was the moment, the memory that Steve held of his mother’s death.

Paralyzed Tony remained silent until Steve – with his angular shoulders and smaller stature, stood up and wiped away the tears. Before he turned Steve said, “You had to come here.” It wasn’t accusatory but sounded more defeated as if Steve had wanted to keep this memory to himself. For a moment, Tony hoped that this image of Steve, this ghost of the past might be speaking to someone else in the memory. He didn’t get his wish. “You shouldn’t have come, Tony.”

Steve faced Tony. He was shorter than Tony. He looked like he hadn’t had a decent meal in weeks. His pallor looked as bad as his mother’s.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Tony said. “You brought me here.” He wanted to be defensive, to attack but hell, he was fairly certain he’d just experienced Steve’s memory of his mother’s death. Trying to keep the profundity of the moment like a flittering butterfly without purchase, Tony added, “You want to tell me why I’m here? Why you’re like that?” Tony gestured to Steve.

The rest of the ward, Steve’s mother and her death bed dissipated into the darkness. Steve shoved hands into his faded brown trousers. They looked like they were two sizes too big. His shoes had holes in them, the toes of the leather split open. “This is who I am Tony. I don’t know if you realize it, but I spent the vast majority of my life like this.”

“But you’re not this anymore,” Tony replied. Every word meant nothing, a silly defense in light of the truth. Steve would always be this person – this man with the scarecrow shoulders and the strong jaw. He would always be frail in some corner of his mind. Project Rebirth never changed the truth of the man – that was the main reason it worked on Steve but failed on Schmidt.

“Whether you like it or not, it doesn’t matter. This is me.” Steve shrugged. He looked behind him into the darkness where his mother’s deathbed had disappeared. “Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky. He helped me survive this. If he hadn’t-.” He didn’t finish. “You know he asked me to live with him. Sleep on the couch, take out his garbage for a few bucks.”

“That’s nice,” Tony said. His voice sounded weak even to his ears.

“Yeah, I kept refusing. Like some kind of idiot.” He laughed, but the chuckle possessed no joy. The tone inferred derision. “Got myself a good case of pneumonia after I stayed in the flat and had to pick between paying the rent and paying for heat.”

Tony had the good sense to stay quiet.

“Bucky came to the apartment after he hadn’t seen me around for three days. Had a helluva fever. Even now, I can’t remember much of it. Him and his Ma, they nursed me back to health.” He sniffled. “He’ll always be part of me Tony. I can’t deny him. I can’t cut him off.”

Was that what Tony asked of Steve? To cut off Bucky, to make him leave behind a part of his soul? The light dawned – but like the morning it took its time, playing with the horizon, warming the landscape yet only slowly thawing out the frost of the night.

“I know he’s important to you.” The words felt weak and laid flat before him. He wanted to say so much more, but the truth ached through him. His mother died. His Mom. The death would always haunt him.

“He’s more than important to me,” Steve said as he turned to Tony. He looked up at Tony. Looked up! Tony saw the same fierceness, the same determination that always glowed in Captain America’s
eyes in a man that – for Tony – was the barest of memories in Steve Rogers’ story but would always be the major player for Steve himself. “I know that you can’t possibly-.” He stopped, looked down at his slender hands – hands that no longer had the strength to fill the role of Captain America. Or so Tony thought. “I can’t ask you to forgive him. I can’t ask you to accept him in the role of Brother for our pack. But I can -.” He swallowed hard, audibly. When he met Tony’s gaze again there were tears in his eyes. “I can release you. You don’t have to be tied to me, to him. You don’t have to feel his soul. Know what he did – in all the details. You don’t. I can consult with Doctor Strange. I’m sure he knows of someone-.”

It should have been a gift, a peace offering. All Tony saw was the fact Steve stood in front of him, tears streaming down his face, trying to be fucking brave, and he was ripping them apart. It blinded Tony to every other possibility. “So, what? You pick him? After all we’ve been through? How I waited for you to accept me? Accept who the hell you are? This is what happens? This is how it ends?” No happily ever after. Maybe they weren’t meant to be together. Maybe the future held the end for them, not something wonderful and bright. Maybe this was it, then.

“I can’t ask you to do this-.” Steve shook his head and turned, walking a distance away. The world around them faded to darkness and they stood like two actors on a stage. The dreamscape couldn’t even place them in a time or a space. They were so separated and separate from one another. “I can’t have you in this much pain, Tony. You mean too much to me.”

“So, I get tossed aside?” The dark shadows around them pulsed red. Was it of passion? Was it of pain? Or maybe it was the rage teeming inside of Tony.

“No!” Steve said. He looked smaller still in the spotlight as the shadows turned to blood red. “No.” He hung his head and Tony heard the sniffl, the tears as they dropped to the floor like single pings in his heart. “I can’t ask you to sacrifice. I can’t do that to you. I’ve asked enough of you already. Enough of everyone.” Steve looked up at Tony, his face a ruin of emotions. “I’ll take him away. Work with him. Maybe someday we can come back. You don’t have to go through the memories if we clear the bond somehow.”

Tony stepped closer and the red around them swirled. “No. I won’t let you do this. You’re – we’re together now.” He reached out into the red darkness. It froze his hands – he would have guessed it was warm, but it wasn’t. Not at all. “You said you wouldn’t let me sacrifice, but what you’re doing now – what you’re attempting to force. It’s worse, so much worse. Steve, I’m you’re Beloved, but you’re mine as well.” Now he found tears obscuring his view of Steve. Everything smeared with crimson. “You’re taking away the most important person, the most significant thing that’s ever happened to me. How can you do this? How heartless can you be?” Tony knew the words speared through Steve’s heart. If he hadn’t seen it on his face, he surely shared the emotion with him as it rippled out, painful and searing.

“Heartless,” Steve murmured.

Before he could recapture the words, before he could explain them, Steve gazed at Tony and his whole image in the dreamscape flickered then pixelated until it vanished into the red ocean around them. Steve dissipated – his soul gone.

“No! No, no, no!” Tony screamed into the murky shadows, for the red turned to brown and then to mud. He yelled out, as if to a god he didn’t truly believe in. “What the hell are you doing? Stop it! Bring him back! Bring him back!”

A hard push to his shoulder knocked him on his ass and he spun around as he leapt back onto his feet. There he was standing not a meter from him, but not Steve. The portrait of Tony’s discontentment in full technicolor glory. Sullen, dark, and less one arm.
“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Yeah, my thought exactly.” Bucky grumbled. “Where the fuck are we and why are you here? Whoever the hell you are.”

The tug of the bond surely announced who Tony was. Bucky was just being a shit to him. That much was clear. “Let’s not start.” Tony glanced around as a room – a small studio apartment appeared around him. From the furnishings it clearly represented a place from the late 30s.

Bucky walked around the room as if he recognized it, slumping into a tattered sofa that probably doubled as a bed if the blankets and pillows piled on the one cushion were any indication. He waited for Tony as if there was something they were supposed to be doing here. Tony stayed put near the window.

The silence weighed. Filling empty spaces happened to be something that Tony regularly did. He hated vacuums, they reminded him too much of space. “So.” He sighed and looked everywhere but at Bucky. As he stared at the porcelain sink attached to the wall with the exposed pipes, he said, “Sorry I blew your arm off. I wasn’t intending to.”

“Oh,” Bucky replied. “Coulda fooled me.”

The way he spoke, with that slight Brooklyn accent rang something comfortable and true in Tony’s head. Steve spoke like that, sometimes. Not a lot. But he did – every now and again. He cleared his throat. “I really didn’t mean to. The suit, the Iron Man armor I was wearing malfunctioned. We’ll figure out how to fix your arm. I swear it.”

“Doesn’t seem like you want much to do with me,” Bucky said. The dark shadows under his eyes grew deeper, as if they encompassed the whole of the man.

“You can’t say you want much to do with me either,” Tony countered. The waves of resentment and dislike hit Tony like a tsunami.

“Well, as I hear it, I don’t have much to say about it. Your part of this stupid pack,” Bucky glared at him. Tony didn’t look, didn’t try to sneak a glimpse of his Brother tattoo.

“None of us have a choice.” He hated fate.

“No. But I guess you both had a choice about whether or not you were gonna be perverts, right?” Bucky glared at him.

Tony released a held breath and shook his head. “Listen, I spent a good amount of time dealing with Rogers’ homophobia. His was worse, way worse because it was internalized. You know what that does to someone?” He kept his words calm but his heart slammed a rapid beat in his constricted chest. “It eats away at them. When you know, when you think you love someone or are attracted to someone, but society says it’s all wrong – it ruins a person inside. Either they hide it and live a lie forever, never happy and making some of the people around them as miserable as they are. Or if they can’t live with it, they hurt themselves or worse. Is that what you want for Steve?”

“That isn’t Steve!” Bucky jumped up. His eyes raged, his cheeks heightened with color. “He didn’t like guys. He went on dates, with me. I found him girls.”

“You found him. Did he ever find anyone himself?” Tony asked.

“Peggy. He loved Peggy,” Bucky said.
That was true. Steve had loved Peggy – so much. Tony still felt the depth of it when Steve spoke of her. "True. But desire and identity aren’t black and white. It’s not a yes or no question. He’s very clearly bisexual."

Bucky pressed fingers of his one hand into his eyes and muffled a scream. "God! What the hell did you do to him?"

“I didn’t do anything. He bonded with me. He named me Beloved. Beloved-.” Tony leaned in, trying to tear away Becky’s hand, see his face. "Do you understand what that means? Beloved? He loves me. He’s the center of everything for the pack – but for me. He’s the missing part of my soul and I’m that missing part of his. He can’t do this without me. Regardless of what he says, the stupid shit. He can’t! For him it would be like-.” Tony pointed at Becky’s left shoulder where his arm should be. “-like losing a limb. Do you want that for him? Is that what you want?"

Bucky threw his hand up in the air. "What do you want from me? My blessing? Well, excuse me if I’m still processing the fact that my best friend is -." He stopped dead, swallowing the words.

“Go on, say it. A freak? A pervert? A fairy?"

“God, don’t say that. Just don’t say that.” Bucky turned away from Tony. He grabbed at the single window near the sofa. His hand opened and closed on the sill. “Steve’s a good guy, you know. He’s always fought for the underdog. Always cared about everyone, even Arnie-.” He stopped. “Oh! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.” He shuttered his eyes. "Of course. Yeah, yeah.” He didn’t explain his thought processing, but Tony remained still, frightened that whatever breakthrough they might have achieve would be washed away if he interfered.

Bucky mumbled a series of curses as he turned around, spinning like a hapless top until he stopped and stared at Tony. His shoulders drooped as if a great weight pushed them down. “Steve’s a good guy. A really good guy.” He swallowed and cringed like he ate something disgusting. “But-.”

Closing his eyes and bowing his head, Bucky continued, “I know what it’s like to be taken away from everything and everyone you love. I know it’s not the same thing, but everyone should have free will. Free will to love who they want to love.” He looked up at Tony and his eyes shone with tears. “I can’t say I agree or even that I understand – not yet anyhow – but I can’t take Steve away from someone he loves, it’d be like killing someone again, I can’t.” He broke down then and Tony didn’t hesitate, not in this dreamscape.

He crossed the distance between them and grabbed Bucky in his arms, held him close. It took only a few seconds for Bucky to respond. His whole body shuddered under Tony’s embrace and then he buried his head in Tony’s shoulder, his one arm wrapped around his waist. He spoke, muffled into Tony’s shoulder. "I’m so sorry. I wish I could take it back. All of it. There’s so much crowding my head, filling it with noise and horror. I just- I’m so sorry.”

Tony felt the tears run down his own face and he frowned before he replied, “It’s not your fault.” It hurt to say it, to admit it. Logically Tony knew it was true, every damned word of it. But it was still hard not to have someone physically to blame. “It’s not your fault. There’s nothing-.” He shook as he said, “There’s nothing to forgive.” It was true. Every word of it. But it hurt so much like a knife to his soul. They stood there, holding onto one another like anchors against the storm.

The dreamscape dissolved around Tony, the firm grasp of Bucky disappeared and he found himself laying on the couch with Bruce standing over him, a quizzical look on his face. Tony cleared his throat and glanced around, trying to get his bearings. Penthouse. Couch. Tower.

“Hmm,” he managed as he sat up. He blinked several times as Bruce stumbled backward and sat on the coffee table. Pepper would have his ass – regardless of Hulk.
“JARVIS called me, said you were having a crisis,” Bruce said. “You looked like you were sleeping. Is that a crisis? It might be considering how you don’t sleep, so you’re having a crisis. Are you?”

Too many words. Tony scratched at his scalp, messing his hair. “Bruce, just settle down.” He rubbed at his eyes. His head pounded and swam with competing priorities.

“But JARVIS said.”

“JARVIS should learn to mind his own business,” Tony commented and then reality came into focus as the last vestiges of the dreamscape dissipated. “Steve! Steve? You have updates on Steve?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, not really. He’s still unconscious. The doctors can’t figure it out. His body is mending at the correct rate with the serum. He should be awake by now. It’s been a day-.”

“God! A day?” Tony jumped up. “How long did you let me sleep, JARVIS? Jesus Christ!” JARVIS had the good sense not to answer Tony. “A day. No change?”

Bruce stood as well and nodded. “He’s in good condition. The serum is working right on target like I said. But his brainwaves indicate coma like status. The doctors can’t figure it out.”


“There’s some. We detected a spike about three hours ago. One of the doctors thought it might be a dream like state, but then it disappeared again.”

“Well, what about you? You’re the expert in his physiology. What do you think?” Tony asked as he shook off the last grogginess of sleep.

“People seem to forget the most I knew about the serum I screwed up royally. So, I have no explanation. We called in Wong and Strange. They’re coming over,” Bruce said and then checked his old-fashioned wristwatch. Why the hell he wore one, Tony couldn’t fathom – it had to be ruined anytime he turned into the Hulk. Bruce continued. “In just about 20 minutes they are expected to arrive.”

“Twenty minutes? Shit! Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Tony said.

That’s when JARVIS decided to chime in. “Now you know why I had Doctor Banner wake you, sir.”

Tony grimaced. A smartass AI was just what he didn’t need right now. Tony waved off JARVIS and his nonsensical explanations. The AI surely needed an upgrade. “I gotta shower. I’ll be there in 5.”

Bruce eyed him. “Eat something too. We’re meeting on the medical floor.”

“Got ya!” Tony said and didn’t wait around for Bruce to leave. Instead, he hustled his way to the bedroom en-suite and shed his clothes as he headed for the shower. JARVIS had the water steaming as he stepped into the large marble tiled shower with multiple shower heads. Tony stood in the stream and let the water hit him as he thought over what he’d learned in the dreamscape. If he knew anything now, it was that what happened in the dreamscape would affect their lives in the here and now. He had no other choice but to confront it and deal with the consequences. At least now, he knew that Bucky would eventually accept them – poor bastard.

Part of Tony still wanted to hunt the bastard down and choke him to death like he’d done to Tony’s
mother. But the saner part, the smarter part, understood that Bucky was as much a victim as his mother. Now, though, he knew it more intimately. Having Bucky breakdown in his arms meant more to Tony than he cared to admit. Yet, it still left Steve – ready to shatter their bonds in order to help Bucky. It wouldn’t happen now. Bucky accepted them – well, as much as he could at this point. Tony knew it would take time, just like it’d taken Steve time to accept his own orientation. Getting Steve to come onto the same page wouldn’t be a problem – that was as long as Tony could get Steve back.

Was Steve running? Hiding from them? Was that the cause of the coma?

Or was it something else? Something more nefarious?

Tony dismissed his fears and finished his shower – scrubbing and rinsing efficiently. He toweled dry and dressed quickly choosing a pair of black jeans and a t-shirt to match. The t-shirt had no graphic art on it – Tony wasn’t in the mood. Most of the time he liked to wear different bands and show his appreciation of classic rock. Today felt different. He didn’t wait for his hair to dry and rushed to the elevator for JARVIS to take him to his destination, forgetting completely about breakfast.

Before the car arrived on the designated floor, JARVIS said, “I do hope that Captain Rogers will make a full recovery, sir.”

Tony gritted his teeth and nodded. Even his AI understood the gravity of the situation. When the lift opened on the medical floor, Tony whispered, “Thanks.” He left without further word and went directly to Steve’s room. Wong and Strange were already huddled with Bruce, Natasha, and Sam. When Tony arrived, they all quieted and stared at him.

“What?”

Natasha held up her hand as if to ward off a barge of questions. “We want to tell you Tony, but you have to give Doctor Strange a chance to explain.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Tony said and then peered around the group to see through the window into Steve’s room. He still rested on the bed, unmoved and still. Wires and tubes littered his body.

“What’s going on?” A sudden and horrible fear hit him. What if in the dreamscape Steve lost his way back? What if Steve was gone for good? What if the bond broke when Steve said he wanted to do it? Now, Steve flailed around in the netherworld, lost and alone. “What’s happening?” He pleaded.

“Nothing to get worked up about,” Bruce muttered.

“We’ve been talking to Doctor Strange-.” Natasha glanced at the sorcerer.

“Yeah I got that in one. Can we move forward now? What the hell is happening?” Tony asked.

“As a surgeon, I had always liked families that wanted the answers straight and not sugar coated,” Strange said. He acknowledged Wong before he turned back to Tony. “After our examination of Captain Rogers, we determined that a rare and dangerous schism has occurred between Captain Rogers soul and his mind.”

Tony screwed up his face. “What does that even mean?”

“It means that Captain Rogers can’t make it back to his body from the place his soul resides. Not yet.”

“I don’t know-.” Tony stopped and placed a hand on his chest. “The place his soul resides?”
“Yes,” Strange replied. “His soul resides in pieces, more so than any of yours does. His soul is splintered into each and every one of yours. Because of this the larger the pack gets the more dangerous it is for him. When there are issues amongst the pack, he feels them greatly, more than any of you do. When the pack doesn’t unify, he is the one who suffers. He’s not only the pack leader but he’s the one who gave his soul to each of you.”

When Tony examined Natasha’s and Sam’s faces, he discovered the same dismay and discomfort there that holed up in his own soul.

“The pack has grown too large for him to completely control by himself. The pack has too many members that haven’t been unified within the whole. Your pack is in danger of failing. If it fails.” Strange stopped.

Wong completed his warning. “If it fails one of two things will happen. He pulls back his soul from all of you and the pack dissolves. Or.” Wong cleared his throat and then said, “Or he donates his soul pieces to each of you and he passes.”

“Passes? Passes what? A mile marker? What?” Tony snapped. “Because if you’re saying he dies, that is not going to happen. Steve Rogers does not give up. He never gives up.”

“No, that little shit never does give up.” The voice sounded tired and Tony whipped around to meet Bucky shuffling over to the group from his wing of the medical floor. A large white gauze covered his stump and he held his shoulders hunched forward. “He ain’t going to give up I can tell you that.”

Strange considered them. “Well that means that you must bring the pack together to strengthen the bonds and to show him the way home – that the pack is his beacon, his center.”

Natasha scrutinized each of them before replying, “Well that’s going to be a little difficult considering he hasn’t even met two of the pack members – not really. And we’d have to get them here.”

Sam raised his hand. “I’ll contact Clint ask him to bring the twins back.”

Tony nodded, not trusting his voice. Losing Steve wasn’t in the realm of possibilities. He chewed on his lip as Natasha and Sam made final plans and Wong moved Strange away from them to discuss the next steps. That left only Bruce and Bucky hanging with Tony.

“You two need some time?” Bruce asked. He thumbed behind him to the hospital room. “I’m gonna go and check on our leader.” He left them then, Tony should have called out, asked him to stay but he turned to Bucky instead.

“You really think he’s not going to die?” Tony failed to speak over a whisper, the words held power and a part of Tony – a tiny part – feared voicing them would make it true.

“No, not him.” Bucky wasn’t looking at Tony. He was standing up straight, staring at his friend through the window. “I’ve been around him plenty of times when he flirted with death.” He glanced at Tony and then back at Steve. “And let me tell you that little pisspot likes to flirt with death. Maybe not with dames or,” he stumbled over the words, “guys, but death – death is his mistress. He knows how to dance with her. He never quite finishes the dance, you gotta bring him back. It’s gotta be you. You know that, right?”

Tony watched Bucky, watched him as a pack member, as a friend and brother to Steve. “I know.”

“It’s gotta be you. We’ll all be there to help out, but you gotta be the one to call him back. Otherwise, he might just finish his dance.” Once he finished speaking, Bucky released a breath and his shoulders
curled downward with the burden of his past again.

Before he scuttled away, Tony caught him and said, “I want you to know, I remember everything from the dreamscape. I know who you are. I meant what I said.”

Bucky blinked rapidly and then pursed his lips. “Yeah. Me too.” He left Tony then, his demeanor diminished, and Tony couldn’t help but see how he attempted to remake himself even with only one arm. The man simply wanted to be small like Steve had been – non-threatening and hidden away from prying eyes. The heat of shame warmed Tony and he almost went after him but Strange called him back.

Over the course of the next few hours, Strange, Wong, and Bruce grilled Tony about the dreamscape and his interactions with Steve in it. Tony left out the more erotic details but explained how the dreamscape had really been their safe zone, their spot to be with one another even before they were bonded.

“Even after we bonded officially, the dreamscape was a safe place. There, Steve accepted me as his Beloved before he had in real life,” Tony said. They were seated in the small medical conference room. The large screens dotting the walls were dark and the windows to the city below them shaded. The long highly polished table was empty as were most of the chairs. Only Wong, Bruce, and Strange attended Tony.

“You said you visited him there again. Just last night?” Wong asked.

Tony affirmed. “Yeah. He wasn’t himself. He was little. Small like he was before Rebirth. His mother was dying and then it was just us. The two of us.”

“What did he say?”

Tony looked up at Strange. He’d taken to talking about the dreamscape as he hunched over and stared at his folded hands. “He said he wanted to break the bond between us, set me free.”

“That’s not good,” Wong said. Strange gave him a scowl and he backtracked. “Well, it’s not great. It could be good.”

“No it can’t,” Strange said.

Wong shook his head, his jowls vibrated. “No, no it can’t.”

“Fuck!” Tony said and sat up. “Do we have a fucking chance or not? Is he going to do this split off and die thing? Is that what he’s trying to do?”

“We won’t know until you’re there again with him. With all the pack members,” Strange said.

Tony threw his hands up. “I don’t know how to get there. Not like purposefully. I’ve never done it that way.” Sure, that one time with Steve in England was almost directed, but really not. He thought of that as mutual dreaming or some shit. “It just happens.”

Strange waved his hand as if clearing the table. “Doctor Banner will lead you there.”

“What?” Bruce perked up. “I don’t know how to get there. I’ve never been there. How would I know.”

“As a soul pack you are all sorely inept,” Strange replied and then grunted. “We will show you. Don’t worry about it.”
“I worry about everything,” Bruce muttered and clenched his hands.

“God. This had better work,” Tony said.

No one said it will and just that fact terrified Tony.

When Sam returned with Clint and the Maximoffs, Tony’s anxiety went into a fever pitch. First, he was too hot, then too cold and all the while he needed to pace, to move. Natasha asked him to settle and sit several times, but he needed to move. They all met in the conference room again. This time the room filled with people, the table and chairs occupied. A certain unease roiled the room. Everyone felt it. They had strangers amongst them but at the same time, these new people were the pack of their pack. Tony murmured the Soul Mantra just to try and calm himself. It didn’t work. He knew nothing would, not at the brink of what they were trying to do.

Clint introduced the two new members. Both looked like deer in headlights. The young man with a shock of white hair kept his hands on his sister, one arm around her shoulders as if to protect her from the rest of the pack. They should be in the hands of the authorities. This girl was a menace. She attacked a train, and while no one died, people had been injured and property damaged. Shouldn’t she be held responsible?

As if the young man read Tony’s mind, he raised his upper lip in a silent snarl. Oh this was going to work, sure it was. Tony disregarded him. He needed to focus on what Doctor Hocus Pocus was saying anyhow.

“Doctor Banner as the Healer of the group will lead each one of you to the dreamscape that Tony has previously described.” Strange stood at the head of the table. Tony imagined him with a power point presentation of their journey behind him, though the screens were still dark. There was no map or known route. How would they get there? Would they be able to find Steve.

“I would suggest that you use Stark and Barnes as your markers. They would be closest to Captain Rogers,” Strange directed.

It didn’t escape Tony that a number of his team mates (particularly Natasha and Sam frowned at Strange’s pronouncement).

“How am I supposed to find this route. Tony’s been there numerous times, and he can’t just close his eyes and pop he’s there.” Bruce looked green. Not only Hulk green, but nauseous green.

“We’ll help you.” Natasha leaned across the table and reached out her hand to Bruce. Tony watched his internal struggle with regard to whether or not to take her hand.

“Take it you big dope,” Clint hissed.

Yeah, they were a winning group. Tony hung his head.

“We can help,” the young woman – Wanda said. “I know how to manipulate the mind. It may help to guide you.”

“Oh playing around in his mind is not a good idea,” Clint said as Sam whistled agreement.

“She is trying to help!” Her brother shot out.

“Okay, okay,” Sam said and stood up. “Let’s remember we’re all kind of in this together. We might not be a cohesive pack, but we each have to come together to get this job done. Steve means something -,” he stopped and glanced at the brother and sister, “or will mean something to each of
us. If Mister Wizard here is telling the truth, we each hold a piece of Steve’s soul.”

Tony liked Sam more and more each day. Mister Wizard frowned at Sam’s characterization and Tony loved it.

“We have to pull our shit together and save him. I don’t care if you don’t know him. He risked his life to pull the two of you out of a situation you got your asses into in the first place,” Sam directed to the twins. “And he went out on a limb to rescue you because that’s who he is.” He pointed at Bucky this time who only raised his one hand in surrender. “We’re doing this. We can. Far as I know, Steve and Bruce pulled Clint from the edge of nowhere once. We can do this for Steve – this time.”

Strange licked his lips and then cleared his throat. “Mister Wilson isn’t wrong. You’ve done something similar before, Doctor Banner. You just need to do it on a wider, more intricate scale.”

“Just,” Bruce muttered but had a hold of Natasha’s hand.

They adjourned with the intention of heading directly to Steve’s room. Sam stopped both Tony and Bucky by standing in the doorway, arms crossed and a decided glower to his expression.

“What?”

“Are you two going to be able to do this?” Sam asked. “Because I want to be sure before I lay my boy’s fate in your pigheaded brains.”

Bucky only twisted his mouth in muted glee at Sam’s turn of phrase. Tony rolled his eyes and assured, “Yes. We’ve come to an understanding.” He tried to step around Sam, but a hand on his arm stopped him.

“You get that we’re all going to be exposed in there, that we’ll be able to see each other’s deepest selves.”

Tony returned Sam’s concerned gaze. “I get it. I’ve been there before, I know how this works.” He lifted a chin to Bucky. “He does too. We can do this. After all, we all love Steve – just in different ways.”

Bucky flared his nostrils in response but bobbed in his head in agreement. “Yeah. This is for Stevie.”

Satisfied Sam moved aside to allow them to pass. Tony smiled. Even though the pack might be filled with a bunch of chaotic elements, they all cared, they all wanted to do the right thing. Even Barnes.

Tony entered Steve’s room. It felt too small, tight, constricted. Maybe all the people gathered around his bed as if it was a death bed waiting for the end caused Tony to think about it that way. He shrugged his shoulders and wove his way to the bed, everyone parted for him. Bucky followed. Natasha shadowed him. Between the two, Tony perceived something frail, a broken thing they tried to mend yet may never be able. Bruce eased away from Natasha. She’d offered him strength when he needed it, but then had shifted over to Bucky.

Bruce stood at the foot of the bed. Bucky took Steve’s left side, leaving Tony to stand on his right side. Strange and Wong took positions behind Bruce. The rest huddled close. Tony furrowed his brow and wondered if this entailed a lot of chanting and holding hands. He wouldn’t be able to keep a straight face if it did. Even with the seriousness of the moment, a stray smirk crossed his lips. Life and death always pushed him to the absurd.

“Doctor Banner?” Wong said. “You’ve done something similar to this before when you were able to bring Mister Barton from the edge of darkness when his way was lost.”
“Something. Steve was there to help with the bonding,” Bruce said.

“True, but you are able to do this. You’ve explained how you did it before. All you need do is open the entrance to his soul like you did before.”

Wanda slipped alongside Bruce. “I can help.”

For a moment Bruce turned to stone, but then he exhaled a heavy breath. “Just try not to alert the other guy.”

She smiled, a weak and painful cut of her lips. “I think I understand a little about uncontrolled power.” She lifted her hands and brought them to Bruce’s temples. “Relax.”

The door opened.

It made no sense to Tony how it happened or what exactly took place, but he abruptly looked around to see the hospital room in the Tower transformed to a 1930s hospital ward again. So much like the one Tony was just in that he expected to see Steve hunched over his mother’s bed again. But it wasn’t Steve’s mother – not this time.

Steve.

His face ashen and gray, Steve lay unmoving like a corpse in the bed. The entire pack stood only a few feet away from the metal framed bed. All the other beds in the ward were empty. Tony heard the rustling of nurses in the distance but didn’t catch sight of them at all. He saw shadows in the distance, down the long dark hallway as if someone, not part of the pack, watched. He wondered if it was Wong and Strange – but something told him it wasn’t. It was someone else.

Tony tore his attention away from the phantoms and focused on Steve again. It was Steve – robust, healthy, serum enhanced Steve – yet he looked like death.

“Christ. It’s when he nearly died,” Bucky said and then put a hand over his mouth as if speaking the words gave them power.

Nearly died? But he couldn’t die. Tony looked at Bucky and then back at Steve. “He’s not what he was though. He’s not ill.”

“Yes, he is.”

God, Tony had nearly forgotten about Thor. For a huge demigod, he had the uncanny ability to fade into the background.

Thor pushed his way to Steve’s bed. “He’s ill from the pack. From all of us.” Thor lifted his arm to show his soul mark. It turned a putrid color of green gray. “He’s soul sick.”

“This is my mess – not the pack’s.” Tony dismissed Thor’s pronouncement.

“Mine too,” Bucky added.

“Listen to your Guide, my friends,” Thor responded. “It is all of us. We have expected him as leader to piece together our pack, to tell us how to bring such divergent people together not only as members, but as family as well.”

“We helped,” Natasha noted but them clammed up.

“We have,” Sam said but then continued, “We gave him advice but how did we act on that advice?”
“Not often enough, that’s for sure,” Clint said. He closed off, his arms crossed over his chest, his shoulders hunched. “He doesn’t think he’s got a pack. We’re all his family. He’s got no one else.”

The slight pulse from Bucky reminded Tony how alone and desperate he must be – Tony considered Steve – thrust into the 21st century, told to fight aliens, joined up with an agency that ended up being his darkest enemy, and then forced to finally face his own orientation. How fucking messed up would that make anyone? On top of all of that he ended up the leader of a band of misfits in a soul pack.

“The soul pack is Steven’s center. Without us, he drifts on waters as if he’s sent to Valhalla,” Thor said in a whisper. “We must pull him back from the edge of the cascades before he falls over and is lost to us forever.”

“If you mean we gotta do something, I agree. What are we supposed to do with him in bed in this place, though?” Bucky said and then as he gestured to the 1930s hospital ward the world around them transitioned to another room that Tony didn’t recognize.

“SHIELD recovery tent,” Natasha supplied.

Sitting up on the edge of a gurney, Steve had a blanket thrown over his shoulders. Cold frigid weather loomed outside of the tent. Tony heard the groan of the wind as it hit the fabric sides of the tent. Something smelled odd, like ozone.

“This is when they found him,” Natasha muttered to the group as they approached Steve.

“I can heard you,” Steve said but didn’t turn around. “Did you bring the whole group this time, Tony?”

He glanced at the group, the entire pack following him. At the periphery he spotted the shades, ghosts against the light. He ignored them. “Yes, we’re all here to get your ass back to the 21st century.”

Steve still didn’t turn around. “Thought this was the 21st. At least that’s what they said.”

“You didn’t wake up here,” Clint replied.

“No, I did not,” Steve said and turned. His lips were crystal blue. His skin took on the effect of ice as if to touch him might shatter him into a million pieces. “I’m still officially frozen.”

“But if you remember this-?” Tony indicated the tent and the supplies to thaw him all piled up in the corners of the tent.

“Yep, if I remember this it means I was awake.” Steve nodded. “I was, to a certain degree. I remember feelings, images, a few words here and there. It didn’t make sense so in my waking hours I really can’t recall it.”

“But you dream of it,” Bruce said.

“I knew you were the smart one, Doc,” Steve replied.

“Hey!” Tony protested.

“Don’t be cross, Tony. It’s too cold be to angry,” Steve said, and his voice dropped in pitch. The temperature followed his voice, growing colder and colder until Tony wrapped his arms around himself.
“What are we doing here, Steve? What’s going on?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know what you’re doing here but apparently I’m visiting places and times in my life. You know like they always say your life flashes before your eyes. I suppose in some weird way that’s true.” He shrugged and a sound reminiscent of ice crunching under boots echoed in the tent.

“Like he’s dying,” Bucky muttered and then stepped up to the bed. “What are you doing, Stevie? Why are you still here? We’re all here, together to bring you back.” He reached out and touched Steve only to pull his hand back. “Shit, that burns.”

“You should feel it from this side. Like my insides are on fire but I’m freezing just the same.” As if on cue he shivered and then pulled the blanket tighter around him. “Coming home would be great.” He smiled then, sad and soft. “It would be nice to go home.”

“Then come with us,” Tony said and even as he spoke the scene around him dissolved like warm water against a frozen windshield.

This time they discovered Steve in the bathroom of the little restaurant they had eaten shawarma at so many years ago after the Battle of New York. He stood at the tiny sink, yanking the fabric of his pitiful uniform away from an ugly burn on his side. Not all of them could fit in the phone booth sized bathroom, so Tony shoved forward and pushed inside.

“Come home with us. Stop this nonsense.”

“You’ll be happy to know,” Steve said as he delicately worked the material away from the seeping wound. “This is when the soul mark happened.” He didn’t look up at Tony as he worked. Instead, he wet a piece of gauze and dabbed it on the wound. “I might have lied a little when I told Fury.”

“Here? Now?” Tony spun around in the little bathroom even though he hit his elbows on the door frame and nearly fell into the toilet.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “I was cleaning out my wound and bam it hit me. I almost took a swim in the toilet. Hit my head pretty hard.”

“Is that why you were nearly passed out at dinner?” Tony asked. The fog of that night remained thick and unsettling for Tony.

“Yeah. That and the wound,” Steve said. He dropped the gauze in the sink. “What do you want me to say?” He looked over Tony’s shoulder and frowned. “God, Bucky, just open the door. Don’t lurk. It’s rude.”

Bucky swung open the door. He managed to look a little contrite – so did the rest of the team.

“This is not at all like what we did with Clint,” Bruce said and then added. “Reminds me more of an intervention.”

“Aye. We must be more understanding to Steven’s needs.”

“Halt, full stop. Time out,” Steve said. He pushed his way around Tony, and then through the mass of people hanging at the open door into the empty space of the restaurant. There was still shawarma on the table. “You don’t get to come here and baby me. I don’t need babying.”

“God, here we go again,” Bucky groaned.

“Oh shut up you jerk,” Steve said. “You always pushed all these girls at me and never once asked if
I was interested.” He never gave Bucky a chance to respond, instead he faced Tony. “And you, you wouldn’t listen to me about Bucky. He’s a tool, a victim. Did you give it a moment’s thought what happened to him?”

Tony stood, stunned and speechless. What the hell was going on? Belligerent. That was the only word Tony could use to describe Steve. He’d visited with Steve only a few hours ago in the dreamscape and that Steve was sorrowful, mourning, lost. “Is this some kind of test?”

Steve snorted at him and marched over to the table. He scanned the leftover food and picked up a pita. “You know this wasn’t my choice anymore than it was any of yours. I had just woken up. I was trying to figure out my smartphone and why milk cost more than a nickel. I had this plopped in my lap.”

“That’s not Steve,” Bucky said under his breath. He hung back in the crowd, but Tony heard it in his head. He peered over to Bucky. The man grimaced and shook his head slowly.

“Not Steve?” Tony said and pushed Natasha and Clint aside so he could face Bucky directly. He ignored the rambling, ranting man scarfing down food at the table. “What do you mean that’s not Steve.”

Steve had never been false in the dreamscape. In fact, he’d been more of himself in this place between worlds than he’d been in real life for the first year or so of his interaction with Tony.

“Steve doesn’t bitch about responsibility,” Bucky replied. He pointed to Steve as he stuffed his mouth with more food. “That man is not Steve. Not the Steve I know, anyhow.” He shrugged. “Maybe he changed.”

Natasha folded her arms and considered Steve. “He’s right. Steve never complains. He just does it, takes on more and more. It’s the way he works.”

Tony gestured to Steve. “Then who the hell is that?”

“Oh it’s Steve all right, but not really Steve,” Sam piped in. “This is a distraction. He’s trying to get us to leave him, get mad at him. Abandon him.”

“What a fucking lousy thing to do,” Tony huffed.

Sam caught Tony’s arm. “Think about why he’s doing it. Why he’s shielding us from what’s really going on.”

Tony checked his reaction. He chewed back the words and ruminated on the actions of the man he loved. He took a wild swing. “He wants us to let him go. He thinks we’ve, I need to be free of him. That’s what he said before, that’s why he’s doing this. Acting like a prick.” He shrugged off Sam’s hand and went to Steve as he munched on the last of a pita. “You’re not going to win. We’re not leaving you. I’m not leaving you.”

Steve watched him. He placed his napkin on the table, dusted off his hands. “It’s for the best, Tony. Everyone, all of you. I’m trying to save our pack the only way I know how.” He looked over to the rest of the pack. “You all think I have it together. That I have the answer, that somehow, I can make this pack work. I have no idea what I’m doing.” He shifted gears, abruptly. “Look out the window. Look at that. I don’t know what’s coming. I don’t know who they are.”

Tony looked to the window where Steve motioned. There, like figures from a *Twilight Zone* episode, stood silhouettes of people. Who were they Tony couldn’t fathom. When he concentrated on their shadows, he made out only feelings – some were pleasant, others were terrifying. One of the figures
lorded over the rest. The dark shadow of its form large and looming.

“I don’t know who they are. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Steve said. He shuffled over to the window staring out at a landscape that looked not like the remains of the New York battle, but an apocalyptic war. Dust and ash blew down the street. “I can’t fix this if I can’t fix us.” The vehemence in his voice was betrayed by the honest horror in his expression, the fear mingling in his eyes.

“Why do you think you have to do it alone?” Bucky stepped up to Steve. “You always think you have to do it alone.”

“Why?” Steve sighed, his shoulders drooped, and the figures outside stirred as the winds picked up and the gray clouds beyond the windows funneled and threatened. “Because that’s what I do. I’m Captain America.” He wasn’t looking at any of them, just the sky, the storms on the horizon. “That’s what I was made to do.”

Bucky grabbed his shoulder and jerked him around to face the pack. “God, you are more of an idiot than I remember.” Bucky released him, pointed to their group – their pack. “You had the Howling Commandoes once. You have a pack now. They’re here to help you.”

“You’re not Captain America first,” Tony stated. “You’re Steve Rogers first. Before you were that symbol you were Steve Rogers.”

“Steve Rogers makes the man,” Natasha replied.

“I became friends, comrades in arms with Steven first before I knew who Captain America was,” Thor added.

Sam walked over to Steve. “You of all people know the answer to the question, Steve. You. Not Captain America. And I, for one, think it’s high time you realized it.” He considered Steve and when he didn’t speak, Sam nodded. “I’m not waiting around for you to figure it out.”

Sam walked to the back of the restaurant and then faded from view. The rest of the pack watched him and then as if a silent agreement had been struck, followed him until only Steve and Tony were left.

Tony stared at the empty space, the restaurant which had seemed so cramped felt open, exposed, barren. He glanced down at the table and only a pit, a chasm, yawned open like the abyss. They were no longer in the restaurant but in that void place between dreams and nightmares.

“What do you want to do, Steve?” Tony asked. “Do you want to fight the good fight alone or do you want this pack? Because I think we come as a package deal.”

“I’m not saying I want to do this alone, I’m saying I have to.”


“Ah! Look whose talking? You flew a bomb into a hole in space. You always try and do the right thing and take everything on your own back. So don’t tell me-..”

Tony seized Steve by his shoulders, his big, brawny shoulders and shook him. It felt like his bones rattled against Tony’s hands. The surprise of it jolted Tony, but he never let go. “You’re not going to make the same mistakes I always make. You can’t! Never you! God, I love you too damned much to see you do that same self-destructive behavior.”
Steve scoffed. “For God’s sake, Tony. I am trying to protect you, my pack, everyone. That’s my job. I signed up for this. You never did. You don’t have to do this, I do.”

“You got a fucking weird sense of mortality and duty, you know that, right? You have a pack! How many times do we-I have to tell you that? You can’t get rid of me. None of us. You take us as a package deal.” Tony squeezed his shoulders that at once felt strong and weak.

“And what about Bucky? Can you handle the pain of what he’s done?” Steve searched his face and Tony knew the horror still stained it.

“Yes. We-we talked. Surprisingly in the dreamscape. We can do this, Steve. It won’t be fun and it won’t be comfortable. I’m not going to call him Brother anytime soon. But a pack is a family. A family doesn’t abandon one another when it gets rough.” Tony dropped his hands. If Steve was going to escape, if he was going to cut their ties, he would do it now. There was no more argument. Tony pointed to the void around them where the unknown, the good and the evil lurked. “This is the endgame. Here. Now. We have to decide how we can face it. What’s best for not only the pack but for the Avengers. I can’t tell you how much my instincts tell me to race off like a maniac and do what I do best.”

“But you won’t,” Steve said, and a little smile dimpled his cheeks. “I know what you mean.”

“So?” Tony asked.

“So,” Steve said and looked away. “We do this together.” And with the last he met Tony’s gaze. All the answers to every question Tony had were there.

Tony whispered his response.

**EPILOGUE**

“You’ll be careful, right?” Tony murmured as the night shrouded them from the day. Quietly in bed, Tony spoke into the night.

Steve’s hand on his shoulder, slung over Tony’s pectorals should have comforted him, eased his worries. “Natasha will be there. I’m not doing this alone.”

Tony twisted his mouth and the coil of concern contorted. “I know. I get that, but I’m still worried. He’s not stable.”

“No. He isn’t. We’re lucky that we have this opportunity to help Bucky.”

Tony admitted it. It was still hard to discuss Bucky. Tony clung to the connection with Steve. Bucky was Steve’s best friend and so Tony leaned on that – thought of Bucky only in that regard. He closed off the portion of his brain, his soul that spiraled down to the memories that would filter up to Tony from Bucky. Steve managed to help Tony, even though he probably didn’t know it. Steve’s handle of the Soul Mantra sang in Tony’s head and seeped through his soul at all times of the day. It wasn’t just noise, it was like an inner embrace of love.

“I can design the new arm,” Tony said.

It had only been a few weeks since that fateful day at the safe house. The pack still didn’t live together. It wasn’t a necessity, Wong confirmed that they could all go about their days and nights and never have to actually share the same abode. Half of the pack lived at the safe house while the rest lived at the Tower. Well, most of them. Clint still ended up back on his farm more often than not. Together didn’t always mean physically together. Steve kept them threaded together, they routinely
all made trips up to the safe house. They were all due to leave tomorrow to go to the safe house and then Steve, Natasha, and Bucky were scheduled to leave for the mysterious but newly opened country of Wakanda.

The newly crowned King of Wakanda sent an offer to the Avengers. The world had previously categorized Wakanda as a developing nation, but with the death of T’Challa’s father by the hands of Strucker, things changed rapidly. From Tony’s review of the news, he knew that there had been a violent upheaval and challenge to the throne. T’Challa had settled the dispute, though he admitted that closing off Wakanda and not bettering the world for all under privileged people was a mistake of the past. When Wakanda called, not about Barnes’ arm, but about his psychological health all bets were off. Steve jumped at the chance to give back his Brother a normal life – Tony stayed quiet.

Sure, he agreed that Barnes needed the psychological support and help. Sure, he wanted Barnes out of his hair and thousands of miles away on another continent was about as good as it got, but truthfully, Tony didn’t want Steve to leave. He only just felt as if they’d managed to piece each other back together again. Although Steve wouldn’t mention it, his recovery had been painful. Just because he had the serum, didn’t erase the pain of injury and recovery.

“I don’t want you to go,” Tony said, not realizing he’d spoken out loud until his voice echoed in their bedroom.

Steve curled his arm tighter around Tony. “I know.”

Tony stared blankly into the darkened room. He saw nothing, but the pain cleaved in his chest. “You go, who will come back?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Steve whispered while he lightly rubbed Tony’s chest with the tips of his fingers.

“When you get back, who will you be? You’ll be different.”

“No, I won’t,” Steve said. “I’ll still be me. The same guy kicking himself for wasting so much time with you. The same guy wondering about everything that goes on in that head of yours. The same guy madly in love and kind of embarrassed about how much of my brain power is consumed thinking about you.”

Tony adjusted his position so he looked at Steve. “Really? You think about me.”

Steve was half up on his one arm. He smirked. “All the damned time. I gotta do something about it. One day we’re going to be in the middle of a battle and I’m going to be thinking about how your hair sometimes curls and how you always mess it up. And how I want to run my fingers through it. And then bam! I’m going to be toast,” he chuckled as he said it, but the glimmer in his eyes delighted Tony.

When he calmed down, Tony placed his hands-on Steve’s shoulders. “Are we going to make it?”

“Yeah, Tony, I think we are,” Steve said. “We might not be like other soul packs, but you – all of you – but you especially taught me that this is a thing we do together. You are my core, my fulcrum. I can’t do this without you. And with you as my center, everything and everyone else revolves around us.”

“But not really, like it’s a mess.”

“Like those p and d electron orbitals you talked about,” Steve said and smiled.
“Hey! You listened. And yeah, something like that, but maybe a little more spooky.”

“Like quantum entanglement,” Steve murmured as he fell back to the bed.

“You really have done your homework.” Tony sat up. “It’s very much like that, but different.”

“Everything is like that but different, it seems.” He pulled Tony toward him. “Now, how about you take it slow and easy and we make love?”

They hadn’t. Not really. Not since the whole horrible mess occurred and both Tony and Steve needed time to reset and recuperate. Tony admitted; it wasn’t easy. Steve left often to go to the safe house where Barnes and the twins stayed. He went there to help them acclimate, to work with Hill and Fury on their integration into the team, and to be counseled by Thor as to how to guide the team. Thor often stayed at the safe house. Nat split her time between the Tower and the safe house. The only constants in the Tower were Sam, Bruce, Tony, and Steve.

Tony suspected that a lot of that was because the pack wanted to give them time to find each other again. Had they? Had they climbed that hill and beaten back the fears?

Tony leaned down and kissed Steve. It was more clinical than passionate. His mind still juddered along, analyzing and evaluating. Steve read him too well. He flipped Tony over and pulled back.

“God, Tony you kiss like you’re kissing Fury.”

Tony balked. “Fury? Christ, how do you know how it is to kiss Fury?”

“Well, I don’t but come on. What’s that?” Steve tilted his head and then with a smirk and a wink he pounced. He nuzzled at Tony’s neck, just in the tiny place between his shoulder and ear that made Tony giggle uncontrollably.

He jerked away and muttered, “Stop, stop. That’s not fair.”

“Well, you’ve been so gloomy lately. I thought I would try a different tactic,” Steve said and then buried his face in Tony’s abdomen and proceeded to splurt raspberries into his navel.

Tony gasped for air as the laughter bellowed out of him. He swatted at Steve. “Wha- What!” He hit Steve until he stopped. Hiccuping for air, Tony rasped out. “What is wrong with you?” He wanted to protest more, but he found a strange warmth filling him, suffusing through him as Steve mingled his soul within Tony’s core. It shivered through him and he quaked in response. A drunkenness came over him and he relaxed into the cushions. “What are you doing?”

Steve slipped his arms under Tony, just hovering over him. “I don’t want to go back Tony. I don’t want to see the despair I used to have in my soul. I want to celebrate being with you, having a pack, a family. We’re together and I don’t want to ever let that go again.” He kissed Tony’s forehead and then whispered, “I know there are things that make it difficult. I know everything isn’t perfect, but when is life supposed to be? Right now, I want to love you and that’s all my soul needs.”

Tony cradled Steve’s face in his hands and kissed him. Their soul merged, bright, hot with desire, but also tender with love. For the first time, the love surrounded him not like a cloak to hide him but like wings to shield him and to lift him at the same time. He flew higher, much higher than Icarus, though he never fell. Steve’s hands were on his body, guiding him and touching him. He offered as much and more than he’d ever thought or hoped he could with Steve. His body, his mind, his very soul become a lightning rod, hot with pent up energy, and then crackling and burning with passion. When Steve entered him, he held his knees and legs open, wanton and brazen all the same. He wanted it all. Steve gave over everything he had. His body, his heart, and his soul. The slip and slid
of bodies together, the slap of skin against skin, the heat of sweat mixing between them lifted Tony until his mind went blank and his mouth lax and open. He rode the thrill of his need, the grind of Steve’s body, the thrust of his cock. Tony opened eyes he hadn’t known he’d closed and witnessed a kind of angelic transformation of their souls. Merged and knotted together. Their markings on their chests glowed with desire and heat. When Tony reached up and grazed his hand over Steve’s pectoral down to his tense abdominals, the touch pushed Steve over the edge. He came with a resounding groan and his body held still as if the world around them answered and stopped. Tony couldn’t take his eyes off Steve, so transfixed and engaged.

And then the climax released him from its clutches and he cried out, wholly and completely. Steve gazed down at Tony, a look of surprise etched in his features. He shifted and slipped out of Tony. Then slowly he bent down and brought Tony back to the heavens himself. Steve’s mouth was a masterpiece of perfection and skill. When he finally came back to himself, breath would barely fill his lungs. It was Steve petting him and shushing him that finally regulated his breathing again.

After they held one another. Tony knew it wasn’t their last day, or their last moments together. They built a foundation. A strong and stable one.

In the coming days they would be separated by mere miles. Thousands to be sure. But Tony’s soul wrapped around Steve and like a Möbius strip Steve’s encompassed Tony’s. They were knotted together. The dark shadows of the dreamscape threatened, but together – as a pack – they had the strength and courage to fight off the unknown. Each pack member gave to the whole, strengthening the bonds and weaving together a new network of energy and light.

In the coming days their pack would grow and find family members across the globe and the heavens. They would add Diplomat, Teacher, Rogue, and Archangel in the years to come. The bonds would grow stronger, all centered around two individuals.

Two.


Maybe these were the subatomic particles within their souls, the forces binding them together.

Trials tested those bonds in the coming days and months, and years. For the moment, Tony worried about only today. Steve, Natasha, Bucky left the safe house on their journey to a foreign land, hoping to find a certain peace for their Brother – a man in coming years Tony would call Brother and would sit with, head on his shoulder, crying in worry. Together they would find peace in their natural love for their center.

That was the future. All Tony knew as he watched Steve leave for Wakanda that blustery winter day was that he was loved and that he loved.

He was and always would be Beloved.

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

And so we say goodbye to this verse. I hope you enjoyed it and that it gave you some happiness along the way. I know who each of the future new pack members are. But I
am ending it here, so that we can always look at the Beloved universe and know that they are happy and well together.

Thank you for reading along...

End Notes

. If you would be so kind to leave a comment, or a kudo to tell me you are interested, I would adore it.

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