Forms of Love

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Forms of Love

by bear_bell

Summary

Months after the Avengers' dispute in Germany, the team returns to the US and moves back into the tower. As always, everyone pretends that nothing happened. Tony is just fine with this. He's used to pretending, and he'll be damned if he lets any of them see him flinch.

Tony's the bad guy, after all. He's used to it. He's fine with it. He's good at it.

Only now, there's something far worse loitering around the tower - The Winter Soldier. No one notices the guy at first, but when they do, Tony figures that he should have the soldier's back.

Birds of a feather should flock together, and the bad guys should start a book club.
Tony thought that nothing could be worse than being tortured in a cave in Afghanistan and then literally getting his heart ripped out by a man he admired and trusted.

It turned out that getting the blame for the destruction of a city and then getting his heart metaphorically ripped out by people who were considered the paragons of virtue and honor and good was far worse.

The kicker, tough, was having to live and work with those people after said ripping out of the heart, and then having to pretend that nothing was wrong.

“Massive expansion,” Tony said as an excuse when Sam invited him to the newly reinstated team movie night.

With a frown, Sam suspiciously asked, “Massive expansion of what?”

“Production plants,” Tony replied, keeping his eyes on the blueprints he was pretending to review and approve (the schematics had been greenlighted months ago, the materials purchased, and SI would be breaking ground on three new facilities within the month. Sam didn’t need to know that, though). “I leave for Korea in two days.”

His brow furrowing, Sam argued, “We’re watching Star Wars. It will be Bucky’s first time seeing it. Clint says you hold house rights on showing sci-fi movies to alien beings and humans out-of-time.”

“Damn,” Tony said, doing his best to sound convincingly disappointed. “Between the facilities in Korea, Chile, and Morocco, it will be a few months before I have enough downtime for any Star Wars marathons.”

“A few months?” Sam incredulously asked.

Giving Sam a well-practiced pair of sad eyes, Tony told him, “No self-respecting person living in the 21st century can go that long without seeing Star Wars, I know. How about this - I relinquish house rights on Star Wars just this once. I’ll make it up with Star Trek and Firefly. And Pitch Black. And 2001 Space Odyssey.”

“Dude, Star Wars,” Sam wheedle.

“Dude, I’m flying to South Korea in 36 hours,” Tony argued.

Thirty-six hours later, FRIDAY patched a call from Pepper through to the suit.

“Tony, why are you flying to South Korea?” Pepper asked.

“I thought I’d help out with the heavy lifting,” Tony replied.
"What is that?" Tony asked. "Hand it over. As Lord Commander of Stark Tower and the Avengers, I demand that you relinquish all hot food to my care for a thorough inspection—"

"Back, Stark! Down!" Scott Lang demanded, holding the foil encased casserole dish well out of Tony’s reach -- damn Tony’s compact stature! Damn his recessive height genes! "And stop trying to implement fictional command structures to the team! You may be a Stark, but we aren’t playing any game of thrones, we aren’t the Night’s Watch, and winter isn’t coming for three months. Back, I said!"

"I need to make sure it isn’t poisoned!" Tony insisted, making another grab for the divine smelling dish.

"You can test it’s toxicity along with everyone else at dinner tonight!" Lang insisted.

"Fire where now?" Tony asked.

"Geeze, Stark, don’t tell me you forgot -- it’s ethnic food night," Lang informed him.

Tony did his best to keep from falling into a defensive stance.

Lang was still talking. "- my traditional Irish shepherd's pie along with T’Challa’s fataya, whatever German dish Steve has been slow cooking for the past two days, and the leeks Wanda has been stinking up the tower with."

"Foiled again," Tony said with a dramatic sigh. "Come on, Lang? Just a bite for the road?"

"For the road?" Ant-Man repeated with a frown. "You’re not coming to ethnic food night? The team’s been planning this for a month! Sam’s trying his hand at a Cuban dish, and Clint promised some sort of French cheese thing—"

"The team may have been planning this for a month, but SI has been organizing—" he chanced a glance at his phone, and FRIDAY helpfully supplied him with Maria Stark Foundation Charity Benefit @ 8:30P.M. in Boston, "- a shindig at my alma mater for the past six months. Lord Commander Stark’s participation is mandatory."

Lang was still frowning. "But Natasha said you’re responsible for the Italian. Fotacha?"

"Focaccia," Tony absently corrected as he began madly texting Happy and his tailor. "My mother’s recipe, e stasera no. Duty calls. Or technically, people with so much money they can afford to give it away by the fistfuls to absolute strangers call. You run your heists, I’ll run mine. But hey, if Rhodey makes that rice dish he picked up in Egypt, eat an extra bite for me. I don’t know what sort of opiates go into that stuff, but it’s addictive, I swear."

That evening, when Tony climbed into the back of his waiting car, Happy asked, "You avoiding a SHIELD budget meeting this evening?"

"Something like that," Tony replied.

"Pepper told them not to email you an agenda beforehand. They promised they wouldn’t announce meeting topics until you were in the room and had your ass planted in a chair."

Tony made sure to take note of this new machination.
Natasha was watching him with narrowed eyes.

“You went through three walls,” she informed him.

“Sure,” Tony agreed, careful to keep his posture slumped and relaxed.

“You need to visit the med bay,” she stated.

“You noticed that I went through three walls but you didn’t notice that I was wearing my armor when it happened?” Tony argued.

“Your armor only does so much,” she snapped.

“Two years ago, sure,” Tony agreed. “You weren’t around for the post-Cap-battle upgrades, though.” To demonstrate the awesomeness of his latest impact-upgrades to the suit, Tony tapped his knuckles against his sternum. “My armor could take a hit from Thor and the insulated padding would make it feel like a love tap. A brick wall, or walls as the case may be, felt like cotton.”

“That must be nice,” Natasha sniffed. “Having padded armor which protects you from serious impacts while the rest of us were beaten half to hell this morning while wearing our regular old combat gear.”

“Aww, don’t pout,” Tony demanded. “You want the special insulation, I can totally build a suit of armor for you. It would make stealth difficult, but—”

With an aggravated huff, Natasha pushed off of the counter she was leaning against, bairly flinching from her injuries, then said, “If you need anything, the rest of the team will be getting treated in the med bay.”

“Sure thing,” Tony hummed.

An hour latter, Peter Parker’s aunt was putting stitches into his leg while Peter wrapped his cracked ribs.

“Don’t you have medical professionals at the Tower to do this for you?” May asked. “Wait, don’t answer that. I know you have medical professionals at the Tower to do this for you. Half of my coworkers at the hospital are on a freaking waiting list to be considered for that very job. The Stark Tower Medical Unit is the single most coveted position in the entire city’s health community.”

“It was a bit crowded today,” was all Tony would tell her.

It was fine when Tony was interacting with his teammates one-on-one, or in small groups of three or four. The more Avengers there were in one room, however, the harder it was for Tony to keep his cool.

When Tony found himself with five or more Avengers at once, he felt like he was living in that
children’s song about monkeys jumping on beds before falling off and hurting themselves. Except that instead of a bump to the head, the chant which ran through Tony’s mind was something more along the lines of *One fell off and put an arrow attached to a line through my back in an attempt to keep himself from plummeting to the earth below. Or one fell off and cushioned her fall by pulling some Inception bullshit to get me to lie between her and the pavement. Or that one didn’t fall off at all, but pushed me so that I fell instead.*

Tony didn’t like being an Avenger anymore.

The alternative to being an Avenger, however, was to not be an Avenger, or house the Avengers, or supply the Avengers with intel and weapons. And if he wasn’t doing all of that, someone else would, and he didn’t trust anyone else not to go “SHIELD is Hydra” on their asses all over again.

As long as he spent time with only a few of them in small doses, everything was fine.

“Tony,” Steve called.

“What’s up Mon Capitan?” Tony immediately replied, turning on his heel so that he was facing Steve but still moving away from him.

Technically, Tony was backing away from him, but Tony was backing away towards the kitchen which was where he had been headed anyways, so it wouldn’t be immediately obvious that *carefully and quickly backing away from Steve* was exactly what he was doing.

Hopefully. Maybe.

“What are you up to?” Steve carefully asked as he dogged Tony’s movements.

“I am up to my eyes in work,” Tony answered, only turning his back to Steve once he had arrived in the kitchen. As Steve took a seat on one of the stools at the bar, Tony quickly put the island between him and Steve and then watched the super soldier’s reflection in the chrome finish of the kitchen appliances. “And everyone knows that if you’re up to your eyes in work, you need to be completely submerged in coffee. Ooh, FRIDAY. Take note. Coffee bath. Like, in the pool area next to the hot-tub. A coffee-tub. Or a coffee-wave-pool. FRIDAY, I want the tower to be Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory only with coffee instead of chocolate. Well, maybe a little chocolate — mochas are never a bad thing. Clint can be the Oompa-Loompas. FRIDAY, you can be the flying elevator at the end of the movie. We’ll need to hire someone to be Willy Wonka, though. I don’t grow or roast coffee, FRIDAY. I’ll be Augustus Gloop. Lord Commander Augustus of Wonka’s-Coffee-Tower and—”

Tony almost had a coronary when Steve’s hand came down on his, halting his attempt to take a sip of the freshly brewed coffee he’d just poured for himself.

“I think you’ve had enough coffee today,” Steve quietly told him. “I wanted… We need to talk, but I think it might be best if you go get some sleep first, Tony.”

“Sure thing,” Tony numbly agreed as he carefully set his mug on the counter (he liked that mug. He really, really liked that mug. It deserved better than to be smashed against Steve Rogers’ face. In the Captain America vs. Mug battle, the mug would loose, and Tony *liked* that mug). “Sleep. Okay then.”
Steve was right, of course. As Tony quickly and surely made his way towards the penthouse, Tony knew that Steve was right. Tony really needed some sleep. Sleep meant that he would be fully alert the next time he faced Steve, and he wouldn’t forget to keep eyes on the other man. Sleep meant that no one would sneak up on him or intrude in his space or touch him or-

Tony clearly needed sleep.

The Avengers had been in residence for six months, and Tony had done a fine job of avoiding Bucky Barnes during that time. The rest of the team -- fine. Whatever. He could handle them. But Barnes? Tony needed time to deal with that shit.

Six months was more than enough time to properly armor himself, though, so when Tony pressed the button for the common floor and FRIDAY informed him, “Sargent Barnes is currently reading in the living area, Boss,” Tony didn’t immediately say fuck that and press the button for the penthouse. Instead, Tony said, “Fuck that. I’m too tired for the half-caff shit Vision keeps sneaking into my coffee maker. I want the full strength stuff they keep in the Action room.”

FRIDAY didn’t reply. Instead, the button for the common floor lit up and the elevator began to move.

When Tony stepped from the elevator, Barnes glanced up from the paperback book he was reading, spotted Tony, and treated him to a narrow-eyed gaze.

Tony stopped walking when he saw the title of the book Barnes was reading.

“Seriously?” Tony asked.

“What of it?” Barnes replied.

“The guy who was kidnapped, held prisoner, and then brainwashed is reading a book about a guy who kidnaps a woman, holds her prisoner, and attempts to brainwash her.”

“I thought it was only Hydra,” Barnes informed him. “Apparently that sort of treatment isn’t reserved for megalomaniacs attempting to create weapons. It’s for people in love, as well.”

“That is not love,” Tony announced, pointing an accusing finger at the book.

“For her, no. For him? It’s the only sort of love he knows. It’s what he feels and what he understands. Just because it’s unhealthy, destructive, and unconventional doesn’t mean that his emotions are invalid.”

“He tortures that poor woman,” Tony pointed out.

“Because he’s imperfect,” Barnes agrees. “If he truly wanted to find love, he would assess his limitations and objectively consider his possibilities. There are plenty of pretty young girls out there who are desperate to escape their lives and would be susceptible to the emotional manipulation he’s attempting to employ --”

“Great science, you admire that sick son of a bitch,” Tony realized.

“I admire his ambition,” Barnes corrected. “He is a simple man with simple needs with the means
of getting what he wants. He’s a complete idiot about it, of course. But he doesn’t care about power
or influence or prestige. He’s a lonely man in need of company, and he would be content with
such.”

“Oh, don’t be naive,” Tony snorted. “I know you’ve been on ice for most of your existence, but
you should understand just as well as anyone that nothing ever works like that. He built some
fantasy in his head, and that girl was lucky enough to die before he could be faced with reality.
Once he was faced with reality, he would have dealt with it the same way he dealt with everything
else in his life - inappropriately. Probably with violence. And if things had gone his way? Well that
wouldn’t have gone well either. The reality wouldn’t have been as good as the fantasy, and his
behavior would escalate until-”

“Calm down, Stark,” Barnes demanded with a sneer. “It’s a story. He’s not a real person.”

“Yet here you are talking about how great he is-”

“I just called him an idiot!” Barnes argued. “I don’t admire him. I relate to him, you ass. I’m not
good at interacting with people or the world and I don’t like to, but I’m lonely. I’d like nothing
more to go sequester myself in a cabin somewhere and steal a bit of company, but I’m not stupid. I
know that wouldn’t make me feel better, and I know perfectly well what Stockholm Syndrome is.
Now fuck off, or else I’ll make a point of being present any time you watch any of those futuristic
movies you like so much, and I’ll tear apart your favorite characters in all of them.”

“Where did you even get that?” Tony asked, motioning to the book.

“Natasha’s room,” Barnes replied.

Barnes should have started with that fact. Tony made a quick retreat before Natasha realized that
someone had been in her room and that they had taken something from it.

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Sam had family, Rhodey had family, Lang had family, and Clint had family. Clint took Natasha to
the farm (and Tony was always a bit uncomfortable saying that, because it sounded like a
euphemism for enforced superhero retirement, and because Tony was sure that Laura had enough
tranqs hidden around the house that such a euphemism could one day become applicable).

Steve stayed in the kitchen for the most part, cooking enough food to feed the Avengers who
remained in the tower, Santa, Santa’s reindeer, and Santa’s army of dwarves.


“Elves, dwarves, ents, orcs -- whatever LotR species Santa is conscripting to assist in toy making
this year, Steve is cooking enough food to feed them all,” Tony replied.

“Thank you, Wanda,” Vision said with a small smile as he finished inspecting… whatever it was
that Wanda had stuffed into a too small, glittery, green-and-red bag for Vision.

Tony was glad that Vision had opened his gift from Wanda before Tony stuck his hand into the
snowflake covered bag she’d given him. The forewarning was appreciated.

He was also able to tell her, “You are such a troll. You are a Christmas troll. Please tell me you
gave Natasha your first attempt.”

“General Ross received my first attempt. He has been instructed to wear it to the summit next month. It has beads.”

Laughing, Tony said, “Forget Santa. You are responsible for all of the Christmas miracles. So, uh…. Thank you for the… homemade knitted… is it supposed to be a cumberbund?”

“It’s a cowl,” she corrected with a frown.

“What’s a cowl?” Tony asked. “Is it like a towel? Is this supposed to be used like one of those paperless drying mechanisms in cheap gas stations where everyone dries their hands on the same cloth and its always damp no matter how much you turn it-”

“The pattern’s creator described it as a clothing garment to wear draped around the neck, similar to a scarf, but with closed ends,” Vision quickly supplied.

“Oh. Cool. Thanks, Wanda. And keep practicing! Hey, give it a couple more tries and the neck clothing garment you give me next Christmas might show up on the front cover of Vanity Fair as the next great winter fashion.”

“That one is more likely to wind up on the cover of Vanity Fair,” Wanda pointed out. “Fashion is like modern art -- put something formless and ugly on a person, put that person on a magazine, and suddenly it is considered attractive.”

“You see?! You’re a fashion diva in the making. If that whole crime fighting thing doesn’t work out for you, you can always fall back on-”

“What is this?” Barnes asked as he unwrapped Tony’s present.

“It appears to be dead insects,” Vision supplied.

Of course Steve chose that exact moment to deliver a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls to the living room, and he frowned at the framed butterfly specimen which Bucky had unwrapped. “They’re… beautiful,” Steve slowly said. “But… why would someone do this to something so pretty? It seems cruel.”

“Preserving butterflies and other insects in special glass boxes is extremely common,” Vision oh-so-helpfully explained.

Barnes blinked at the glass encased butterflies with their Latin names written underneath, then at Tony. “What… what is this for? Am I supposed to… do something with ’em?”

“It’s… for decoration,” Tony said slowly.

“You think Bucky wants to decorate his apartment with dead butterflies?” Wanda asked, eyeing Tony as if he were insane.


“Ah,” Steve said slowly.

“Thank you, Tony,” Barnes informed him with a strained smile, setting the butterflies aside and reaching for his next present.
What the fuck? Tony wondered.

“What the fuck?” Barnes cried.

Tony jumped, his hand knocking into his cup of coffee and sending it spilling across the table and ruining the sections of the newspaper Steve had set aside to read later.

It was the 29th of December, the day before the rest of the Avengers were supposed to return to the tower, and Tony was doing his damned best to condition himself to tolerate Steve’s presence. He’d been so hyper aware of Rogers, however, that he hadn’t been paying any mind to the other Avengers sitting with them.

“What is wrong with you?” Barnes continued to yell, throwing a book at the table with such force that it bounced off of the tabletop and against Tony’s chest, making him fumble. “Why would you taunt me with something like that?!”

Looking down at the book, Tony saw that he was holding a newly purchased (and now coffee splattered) paperback version of *The Collector*.

“Bucky, what’s wrong?” Steve asked.

“That asshole gave me a reference to a story about kidnapping and psychological torture as a form of love for Christmas!”

“Stark!” Wanda snapped.

“Tony, why would you do something like that?” Steve asked, giving Tony that same fucking look-

“Seriously!” Barnes snapped. “What is wrong with you?!”

“Me?!” Tony cried. “What’s wrong with you?! I wasn’t taunting you! You said you liked it!”

“I liked it? Liked what? Being tortured and brainwashed?”

“The Collector, you jerk!” Tony snarled, throwing the book back at Barnes’ chest.

“Why would you think I like something like this?!”

“Because you told me you liked it! You said you related to the main character, and you admired his ambition even if he was a complete idiot and… and… and you have no recollection of that, do you?” Tony realized. “You don’t remember stealing a copy of *The Collector* from Natasha’s room and reading it in the living area. You don’t remember us talking about it and getting into an argument. Thor save us, I had an argument about inappropriate forms of love with the Winter Soldier and then got him a Christmas present to commemorate the argument.”

Around the kitchen table, the other Avengers present looked horrified.
“Let me see if I have this straight,” Lang said slowly. “Whatever T’Challa and his people did to deactivate the Winter Soldier’s programming worked, we think. But the Winter Soldier wasn’t destroyed. He’s still… in there with Bucky. And we only found out about it because Tony Stark gave Bucky a Christmas present which was actually meant for the Winter Soldier.”

“After FRIDAY reviewed the tower’s security footage of the last six months, she determined that the Winter Soldier becomes dominant at least three nights a week, and he wanders around the tower,” Steve quietly explained.

“He’s definitely broken into people’s rooms and watched them sleep on several occasions,” Tony announced.

“Tony!” Steve cried, and Barnes covered his face with his hands.

“Well?!” Tony cried back.

“I am not okay with this,” Lang immediately declared. “Hope is the only person allowed to watch me while I sleep. If she finds out someone else has been watching me while I sleep-”


With a long sigh, Lang dutifully recited, “Weird bedroom stuff stays in the bedroom and between the active participants. Seriously, Captain, if you think watching people while they sleep counts as weird bedroom stuff-”

“He wouldn’t be such a prude if he had to share a wall with Wanda and Vision,” Clint groused.

“Hey!” Tony snapped. “This is Stark Tower, not some cheap, poorly built apartment complex! I know for a fact that Wanda and Vision could use jackhammers when engaging in foreplay-”

“Oh, ouch,” Rhodey muttered as his expression twisted in distaste.

“-and no one would hear a damn thing!”

“It’s not the soundproofing that’s the problem, Stark!” Clint snapped back. “When Vision gets worked up he doesn’t always realize that he’s phasing through the walls-”


“Now that we’ve established that there are far worse things than the Winter Soldier staring at us while we sleep,” Natasha dryly intercepted, “can we determine if this is a problem?”

“Tony,” Sam put in. “You said you had a full conversation with him. How did he seem?”

Tony shrugged. “Pretty messed up, but in a self-aware, basic-understanding-between-right-and-wrong kinda way.”

“You got that from a fifteen minute conversation in which you believed you were talking with Bucky Barnes?” Natasha pressed.

“It was a conversation about The Collector,” Tony insisted.

“Ah. That is… an interesting choice of reading material.”

“I thought so, too,” Tony sighed.
Tony was exhausted.

Ever since the team had found out that the Winter Soldier was still a thing and that Tony was the only person who had spoken to him directly, the rest of the Avengers were constantly harassing him.

Actually, they were trying to talk with him to determine what this meant for the team dynamics, their living arrangements, and their battle strategies.

But it sure felt like harassment.

“Tony, this is serious,” Steve ground out, interrupting Tony in the middle of one of his I-don’t-have-time-for-your-shenanigans tirades. Which was somewhat understandable, considering the tirade had devolved into a why-aren’t-my-employees-competent lamentation.

“I can tell that it’s serious,” Tony rejoined. “Do you know how I can tell? It’s because you’re wearing your Game Face, Rodgers.”

Calling it Rogers’ Game Face wasn’t completely accurate. Mostly because it wasn’t just Steve’s expression, it was his posture and body language, as well. He stood squarely in front of Tony’s work table, his feet evenly spread and firmly planted on the ground, his back straight and spine stiff, and his arms crossing his chest. He was doing that thing where his chin was stubbornly jutting out, which meant that he was looking down his nose at where Tony sat at his work bench.

“This is not my Game Face, Tony, because this is not a game!” the man snapped. “You’re the only person the Winter Soldier has interacted with! You have a report with him! We need for you to approach him again and fully assess the situation so that we can understand why he still exists and whether or not he can still be controlled by Hydra!”

On the screen in front of Tony, FRIDAY flashed a message which read **Deep breaths**.

Tony had to follow her command ten times over before he was finally able to bring himself under control. As soon as he was able, Tony slowly stood from his chair and told Steve, “He’s been here for months, Steve. Months. And in that time, the Soldier has never left the tower or FRIDAY’s supervision. He hasn’t attempted to access any information on SHIELD or Stark Industries, he hasn’t been recording information or sending messages to anyone outside the tower, and the only time he accesses any weapons is when he goes to the gym or shooting range. Quite frankly, I don’t see a problem, and in this instance I’m not going to go out of my way to create a problem. Barnes is your project, and I will not be held responsible for him. If you want to assess the situation, you can build a report of your own with the guy.”

Now, Steve was using his Tony is Being Unreasonable glare, which was far more dangerous than the man’s Game Face.

“You have just as much cause to be weary of the Winter Soldier as anyone else in the tower, Tony,” Steve pointed out.

Now, FRIDAY’s message of **Deep breaths** was flashing red.

“Then it sounds like you should be talking to anyone else,” Tony informed Steve.
Tony had gotten very, very good at coming up with excuses and extraneous work in order to avoid the Avengers. Every now and then, however, the excuses and extraneous work was not of Tony’s creation, and there were legitimate work emergencies which arose.

Tony had been on the phone for 10 straight hours with the contractors in Chile. Hours 1-8 had been Level 10, Red Alert, Full Crisis Mode. Hours nine and ten had been damage control.

“The situation is stable,” Tony assured several of the investors as he dug out some leftovers from the fridge in the communal kitchen and stuck the cartons of Chinese food in the microwave.

“Why weren’t we informed that the facility was being built in an area of the country prone to earthquakes?” one of the men seethed.

“Because it’s Chile,” Tony replied with a role of his eyes. “The entire country is prone to earthquakes. Which was taken into account during development and production. Seriously, guys, relax. The three people who were injured have already been treated and sent home, and there were no fatalities because the staff had training for this exact scenario, the facilities were designed to withstand earthquakes, and preventive measures were taken on day one of construction.”

“And construction will continue as scheduled?” the younger of the two men pressed.

“Hell no,” Tony replied. “It was a magnitude 8 earthquake and there was massive damage! The Stark facilities are being used as an emergency shelter while the damage is being assessed in the surround communities, and the construction equipment is being used to assist with rescue attempts. No, construction will not continue as scheduled, you asshole. Come on!”

“Ignore Daniel, Mr. Stark,” one of the other men instructed him with a long sigh. “My son is rather short-sighted when it comes to matters of long-term investment and gain. I’m glad to hear that there was no major damage to the production facilities and that the community now has a safe area to retreat to in times of danger.”

“Hey, that’s Stark Industries for you -- providing investors with more money at some point in the future and providing communities with stable jobs and safe work environments. Improving the world one earthquake resistant facility at a time,” Tony chuckled.

After ending the call, Tony dug into his appropriated food, despite the fact that it hadn’t been nuked long enough and there were mildly disgusting pockets of cold in the rice, all the while furiously texting on his cellphone. The food was almost gone when Clint wandered into the kitchen and began cursing at Tony.

“That was mine, jerk!” Clint declared when Tony blinked at him. “What part of DO NOT TOUCH can’t you read?!?”

Tony glanced at the carton he held, only just noticing that DO NOT TOUCH was indeed scrawled across the side of the carton. He also realized that it was a carton from the good Chinese place. The one that kept unpredictable hours and could only be accessed via quinjet.

“Oops,” Tony said. “Want the last bite?”

“No, you inconsiderate assmonkey! I don’t know where your mouth has been! Seriously, Stark,
would it kill you to get out of your own ego and pay one iota of attention and respect to other people?! Damn it!"

Clint stormed from the kitchen, still cursing Tony’s name, and his mother’s, and that of Tony’s bastard child which probably existed somewhere in the world.

“You’re not going to defend yourself?”

Tony spun around to find Barnes sitting on the counter, his legs crossed and his back resting against the side of the refrigerator. Tony was sure the man hadn’t been there a few moments ago.

“Newton’s shriveled balls!” Tony exclaimed. “Have you been there this entire time?”

“No. I was sitting on top of the refrigerator, before. Why doesn’t anyone ever think to look up?”

“There isn’t food or coffee on the ceiling,” Tony explained.

Barnes didn’t seem concerned with where food was or wasn’t located within the common kitchen. Instead, he said, “He just called you inconsiderate and disrespectful of other people. While you’re dealing with a crisis which occurred on the other side of the planet and organizing rescue and assistance.”

“People get tetchy about food,” Tony said with a shrug.

“Fine. But I don’t understand why you allowed him to treat you in such a way. After he called you an assmonkey, why didn’t you tell him to either shut up and leave you to your crisis management or inform him that food is only for those who earn it.”

“Wow. Let me guess. I am currently conversing with the Winter Soldier, right?” Tony guessed.

The man’s eyebrows furrowed. “Was it not immediately obvious? I was of the understanding that my speech and behavioral patterns were significantly different from those of Sergeant Barnes.”

“I bet they are, but I have officially had more conversations with you than with Barnes.”

“Is that so?” the soldier slowly asked. “Odd. I believed that you were unperturbed by your interaction with me because you had been exposed to Barnes for extended lengths of time.”

“Kinky. Kinky, but no. Does that mean you aren’t aware of what he gets up to when he’s in the driver’s seat?” Tony questioned.

“I am not.”

“Huh. The gang will be glad to hear that, I think. Steve will definitely be relieved to know that there isn’t a voyeur critiquing his technique when he’s making out with Barnes.”

The soldier made a face at the idea of kissing Captain America, and Tony quietly chuckled.

“If Barnes has nothing to do with your composure in my presence, then what is the reason? You can’t have forgotten that I was responsible for the death of your parents.”

Tony blinked. Because… those words, coming out of Bucky Barnes’ mouth even if Barnes wasn’t the one saying them…

With a sharp inhale, Tony told the soldier, “I have not forgotten, no. But you didn’t have any choice in the matter. You were being controlled by Hydra.”
His eyes narrowed at Tony, the soldier stated, “You didn’t know I was here. No one knew I was here. Not until you and I spoke, correct?” At Tony’s nod, he continued. “It wasn’t me you were avoiding. It was Barnes. Why?”

“Because you may not have had a choice when it came to killing my parents, but Barnes has made plenty of his own choices. They all have.”

“Ah,” the soldier hummed.

“FRIDAY says you spoke with the Winter Soldier again,” Steve said by way of greeting.

“She’s such a gossip,” Tony wearily sighed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it was a private conversation.”

“Tony!” Steve snapped, and Tony was glad he wasn’t holding anything, or else he would have dropped it. “We need to know when things like this happen! We need to protect Bucky!”

“You need to protect Bucky,” Tony snarled. “We’ve been over this, Steve! Bucky Barnes is not my responsibility!”

“How can I protect Bucky if you won’t share the information you have on the Winter Soldier with the rest of the team?!!”

“I don’t know and I don’t care!”

“Tony, he’s my friend,” Steve argued.

“Well the Winter Soldier is my friend! So you look after yours, and I’ll look after mine. There. Handled. Done. Now fuck off, Steve!”

“What do you think you’re doing, Stark?”

Glancing up from his tablet, Tony asked, “Programming an automatic response system for the quinjet?”

“What are you doing with Barnes?” Lang asked with a roll of his eyes.

“Nothing. I’ve barely caught a glimpse of the guy from the corner of my eye since Christmas.”

“Yeah? You have conversations with him from the corner of your eye, too? Because word around the tower is that conversations are happening.”

Tony rolled his eyes and returned to his tablet, adding a few lines of code as he told Scott, “There
have been zero point two conversations with Barnes if you count Christmas. There have been two point zero conversations with the Winter Soldier.”

“And two point zero conversations with the guy means that you’re in his corner?” Lang pressed.

“Someone has make camp there,” Tony agreed.

“Hank was right about you. I’ll be the first to admit when Captain America asked me to have his back at Leipzig/Halle, I totally agreed because Captain America. But after hearing the rest of the team talk about you while we were laid up in Wakanda, I thought Hey, maybe this one isn’t just like the other. Hank warned me that you’d pull something like this, though. The Starks always have to have the biggest and shiniest weapons, don’t thy?”

By the end of Lang’s rant, Tony was staring at him with raised eyebrows. “Okay, you lost me there. I don’t know who Hank is, I don’t care about your pow-wow in Wakanda, and the Starks don’t make weapons anymore. You didn’t eat the green stuff in the fridge, did you? For fuck’s sake, Lang, Vision made that stuff. Vision. House Rule 41.”

“Don’t change the-”

“House Rule 41, Lang!”

With a heavy sigh, Scott recited, “Don’t eat anything made by Vision.”

“Don’t eat anything made by Vision! He’s technically related to DUM-E, Scott. They share some sort of binary code that only they can understand - like those secret languages that creepy twins sometimes speak with each other. And they share the same cooking skills, too. You’re an adult - an adult human. You should know better than to eat strange substances in the refrigerator made by-”

“Just forget it!” Scott cried, throwing his hands in the air, turning on his heel, and stomping away.

“NEVER forget House Rule 41!” Tony yelled after him.

It was three in the morning, and Tony almost tripped over Barnes.

Blinking down at the man sprawled across the floor just in front of the elevator, Tony asked, “Whatcha doin, Soldier?”

“I’m attempting to gain comfort,” he replied, his eyes remaining fixed on the ceiling above him.

“Don’t get me wrong, I used nothing but the finest and most expensive materials when building this tower, and I don’t doubt that the concrete you’re lying on is the most deliciously plush concrete you’ve ever reclined against, but if it’s comfort you want, you might consider relocating to the couch.”

His lips twisting into a sneer, the soldier informed him, “I am attempting to gain comfort by immersing myself in something familiar, you think Hydra let me kick my feet up on their couches?”

Blinking, Tony looked around.
Most of the common area was decorated in beige (Pepper nixed the red), but the elevator's lobby was nothing but white, and the elevators doors were a shiny chrome. It occurred to Tony that if the soldier wasn’t on missions for Hydra, then he spent most of his times in labs and military bases. The concrete floor, the clinically white ceiling, and the chrome finish of the lobby was probably the closest thing to familiar the soldier could find without going and loitering in the med bay, and Tony totally understood why the soldier wouldn’t want to hang out there.

“Join me in the workshop?” Tony asked. “There are concrete floors and white ceilings in there, and far fewer people to step on you. Also, food. Rhodey brought me a couple of pizzas for dinner, and I’m trying to watch my figure so I only ate one of them. You can have the others if you like.”

“What kind of pizza?” the soldier suspiciously asked.

“The kind that doesn’t have fruit, vegetables, or anything else which can pretend to be healthy.”

“Fine,” the soldier said, sitting up from his place on the floor. “Lead the way, then.”

In Tony’s workshop, the soldier forewent finding a comfortable bit of floor to lie on and made himself comfortable on Tony’s workbench, instead, straddling the seat and immediately helping himself to one of the pizzas conveniently located directly in front of him.

Tony left him to it, parking himself on the other end of the bench and resuming his soldering work.

“So how’s the workshop rank on the comfort scale?” Tony asked almost an hour later, after the soldier had eaten his fill, abandoned the workbench, and began inspecting the workshop and Tony’s bots.

“12.7,” the soldier instantly replied. “Your workshop is eerily similar to the most advanced of Hydra’s research facilities, but without the looming threat of invasive medical procedures or torture implements. Also, it’s better lit.”

“Yeah, lighting is key when establishing the difference between a safe workplace and a Hydra workplace,” Tony idly agreed. “And the rest of the tower?”

“I want my own room,” the soldier immediately stated. “It’s getting difficult to hide things from Barnes and the Captain in the quarters I cohabitate with them.”

“Hide things? What is it you’re needing to hide?” Tony asked.

“Those lovely butterfly specimens. I found them at the bottom of a trash can several weeks ago along with a copy of The Collector which I assume was meant as a holiday gift for me.”

“You did like it!” Tony crowed. “I knew you’d appreciate my offbeat sense of humor!”

“Your inappropriate sense of humor, you mean. But yes, I appreciated the gesture.”

“In that case, you can have one of the rooms in the penthouse. The room at the end of the hall is Pepper’s, and the first door on the left is Rhody’s. Mine is the one with a door that looks like a vault entrance. The rest are up for grabs, though. Rhody might give you a mean side-eye the first few times he sees you hanging around, but he won’t go into your room and mess with your stuff when Barnes is in the driver’s seat.”

“Good,” the soldier muttered, wandering over to the couch next to the bots and making himself comfortable in the seat as Tony began to tell the soldier the origin story of Tony-and-Rhodey’s-Epic-Bromance.
Tony didn’t stop talking until the morning, when FRIDAY sent him an alert stating that he had a meeting at 1:00 P.M., and he needed to sleep for a few hours if he didn’t want to alarm the board members with his manic energy.

With a long sigh, Tony said, “Sorry soldier, but I’m locking the place down -- it’s bedtime. The board doesn’t like me when I’m manic, and they whisper mean things behind my back about throwing me out of the company for real if they think I might attempt to take over the world while I’m sleep-deprived. Did you want to go check out…”

Tony’s words trailed away when he turned to the couch and discovered that Bucky Barnes now sat in his workshop, staring at him with an incredulous expression.

“Oh. It’s you,” Tony said by way of greeting. “How long have you been here?”

“At hour,” Barnes replied. “I have been here for an hour, with no idea where I am or how I got here. Are we even in the tower right now?”

“Yes. This is my workshop,” Tony informed him. “The soldier likes shiny things, so he was chilling with me here. Come on, I’ll drop you off at your floor.”

At Tony’s insistence, Barnes stood from the couch, allowed Tony to hear him into the elevator, and then mechanically stepped onto his floor, still clearly thrown by the whole waking-up-in-a strange-and-unfamiliar-place thing.

Rhodey watched with an incredulous expression as Tony set up the soldier’s room, meaning that Tony found a room which wasn’t occupied and threw a cellphone, a tablet, and a credit card on the bed, then declared his work done. If the soldier wanted to repaint or get a new bedspread, he could do it his own self.

“Rodgers and Barnes have an entire suite,” Rhodey pointed out as he followed Tony from the room and back towards the living area. “Why can’t he have one of the extra rooms in their place?”

“Because Rodgers would let himself in anytime he felt like it, rummage through the soldier’s things, and then form opinions and judgments of the soldier without actually talking to him, and he’d make decisions on the soldier’s behalf. Barnes would probably trash the place in some attempt to pretend that the soldier doesn’t exist. As such, the soldier’s safe place will be on our floor.”

“But our floor is our safe place,” Rhodey argued.

“Relax, honeybun. Once you meet the soldier and get to know him, you’ll get along with him, I’m sure. He’s one of those military types you like to fawn over and buddy up with.”

“He killed your parents, Tony.”

His hands clenched into fists, Tony snapped, “I know!”

“Then why are you letting him into your home?! He’s hardly even a person!”

“Only because he hasn’t had the chance to be one, yet!” Tony replied. “He’s only ever functioned
as a machine before, Rhodey. The only difference between Vision and the soldier is that Vision
didn’t act as a weapon before gaining free will.”

“And again, I reiterate, the Winter Soldier killed your parents!”

“I know! And he knows! He’s admitted to it!”

“What?”

“He admitted to it,” Tony said again. “No cop-outs, no lame excuses, no brushoffs. He didn’t
whine about how it wasn’t his fault and didn’t have control of himself. He just… stated it as an
unquestionable fact. Honestly, Rhodey, I think the soldier is doing better at coming to terms with
himself than Barnes is. He’s doing better, and he hasn’t had people tripping over themselves to
help him or make things easier for him. He might hardly be a person, or whatever, but I don’t think
he’s a monster, either.”

Rhodey stared at Tony hard for a few moments. Then, the man released a long breath, ran a tired
hand over his eyes and said, “Fine. Fine. But if he watches me while I sleep or anything like that–”

“I’ll tell him to only pull those stunts with the others,” Tony resolutely promised.

“Get up.”

“It’s my jet. It'll wait for me,” Tony groaned, rolling onto his stomach and pressing his face into
his pillow.

“Someone’s watching the Tower.”

Blearily looking around his darkened bedroom, Tony realized that it was the soldier standing over
his bed, not Pepper.

“Are they watching the Tower through a rifle scope? Are they holding a bazooka?” Tony asked as
he sat up with a sigh.

“They’re taking pictures,” the soldier growled.

“FRIDAY?” Tony asked.

“Facial analysis indicates that the photographer is Devin Lobbins, an employee of Stark Industries.
Spacifficly, Lobbins works jointly for SI’s media division and advertising division.”

“So I pay the guy to make Stark Industries look good?” Tony confirmed.

“That’s right, Boss. It’s likely that a photograph of the tower at night beneath a quarter moon will
soon appear as a background on the company’s website, considering that Lobbins has been tasked
with providing a visual depiction of the tower’s green energy at work.”

“And the other photographer?” the soldier pressed.

“That would me Marcia Johnston,” FRIDAY informed him. “She’s a freelance photographer who
sells photographs of high-profile celebrities to gossip publications. She’s been routinely scanning
the tower’s balconies every night for the past week.”

“See?” Tony asked. “FRIDAY has it handled. Maybe next time ask her before coming in here and waking me up in the middle of the -- hey! How did you get into my room?!”

“What if the photographer wasn’t an employee or a gossip rag photographer?” the soldier replied. “What if it was someone attempting to gain insight to the tower’s schematics, the inhabitants schedules, or-”

“The entire tower is covered in one-way glass,” Tony informed him. “We can see out but no one can see in. Also, my bedroom? It’s essentially a safe room. I lock the door for the night and it becomes almost impossible to enter-”

“They’re staring at me,” the soldier argued. “The entire far wall of my room is a window. I can feel them looking at me.”

“You seriously need to start chatting with FRIDAY. She could have told you exactly who those two people staring at you were, and then she could have blacked out your windows. Or she could have projected a view of the Caribbean over them. Or a view of a waterfall. Or a psychedelic light show. Hell, she could project a line of Bucky-Bears doing the can-can if you wanted. And then I would still be asleep and blissfully ignorant of the fact that my bedroom is not as secure as I thought it was, and I wouldn’t have to spend the next week rebuilding the security protocol-”

“The security on your room is fine. FRIDAY let me in,” the soldier snapped.

“You’re in a mood,” Tony realized. “Why are you in a mood? I’m the one who was needlessly disturbed from my rest! Do you know how often I sleep?”

“Not often enough,” the soldier stated.

“Exactly! Not often enough! Yet here I sit, growing increasingly alert by the moment, and you’re the one in a mood! Why are you in a mood?”

“I don’t know!” the soldier snapped. “I tried reading, and training, and I put in an hour at the shooting range! I rearranged the Black Widow’s knives and set-up Vision to take the fall for it! I ate unhealthy food while watching bad television! But nothing is helping.”

Blinking, Tony said, “Huh. It sounds to me like you need to destroy something.”

“What?” the soldier incredulously asked.

“It sounds like destroying something is exactly what you need. Want to help me test some of the prototypes SI is working on? I don’t build weapons anymore, but we still have contracts with the military for defensive products -- armor, shields, heat-resistant materials, pressure resistant materials -- let’s go check out what the kiddies in R&D have been up to and then we can go fuck up their stuff.”

“Will I get to use a flamethrower?” the soldier asked. “My handlers would never let me use flamethrowers on missions.”

“Heat-resistant materials it is!” Tony cheered as he hurried to get out of bed.

After donning experiment-appropriate clothing, Tony escorted the soldier down to the R&D floors where they found a whole floor dedicated to heat-resistant materials as well as one employee who was happy to abandon the work he was engrossed in to show them around.
“-and this is the polymer we’re developing for firefighters,” the overly eager, sleep-deprived woman explained to Tony. “Technically, we’re developing the material for all sorts of things, but the NYC fire department has agreed to help us out with field testing. We’re going to incorporate a calcium silicate base—"

“Awesome. Melony, was it? Melony, I love how you think. My friend here couldn’t care less, though. Mind showing us to the Blast Zone and setting him up with some lights? Then, you and I can take a look at what you’ve set up.”

“Sure, Mr. Stark!” she easily agreed, leading them into the lab and helping the soldier track down some protective gear which fit him.

The three of them remained in the Blast Zone for the rest of the night, Tony geeking out with his new buddy in R&D as the soldier gleefully came up with new and creative ways of destroying all of Melony’s hard work.

“This is great,” the woman gushed as Tony and the soldier were preparing to leave. “Donnie’s been talking about partnering on a project with one of his buddies at NASA - some of this data might give him some ideas on some close-contact materials for sending a satellite towards the sun—"

As the woman started back towards her station, still talking to herself as she slumped into her desk chair, Tony asked, “Feel better?”

“Yes,” the soldier definitively replied.

“Told you destroying stuff would help,” Tony said with a grin. “And see here? You were able to productively destroy stuff. Now we know the limits on all of those polymers my peeps have been working on.”

The soldier hummed as he moved to lean against the elevator wall, flicking a knife from somewhere and using it to pick soot out from under his nails. He’d probably need to shower three times over in order to wash all of the soot and ash out of his hair and skin. He may have gotten a bit over enthusiastic when he was handed a flame thrower.

Tony grinned as he turned to face the doors again.

The soldier may not be showing how pleased he was with how the evening had gone, but Tony knew regardless.

“FRIDAY, is the soldier up top?” Tony asked as he hurried into the penthouse.

“He’s resting in his room, boss,” the AI reported.

Hardly pausing, Tony asked, “What do you think the likelihood is that he’ll attack me when I burst into his room and wake him up?”

“Analyzing the soldier’s previous response to sudden and unexpected stimulus… There’s a 64% chance that he’ll react violently, but with mild force,” FRIDAY informed him.

“Worth it,” Tony decided just before bursting into the soldier’s room.
As the door bounced off the wall and the lights came on, the soldier reacted within the 46th percentile as he abruptly sat upright in bed, but didn’t make any move to launch himself at Tony as he hurried into the room.

“Up and at um, Soldier! I just finished the prototypes for SHIELD’s new drones! Come on - FRIDAY says a lacky will be by to pick them up at noon. We only have five hours to take these puppies out for a spin. Come on, come on, come on.”

Tony found a discarded pair of pants on the floor and threw them at the soldier before headed for the closet.

“Dude, where do you get these things?” Tony asked as he opened the door and found the closet stocked with guns and ammunition rather than clothes. “Whatever, I don’t care.” Slamming the door, Tony headed for the dresser.

“What do you say, soldier?” Tony asked as he opened one of the drawers and pulled out a hoodie and some gloves. “Want to go incognito and head to the park with me, or should we take R8? - no, the RS7. That one has tinted windows.”

“What?” Barnes stuttered.

Tony froze.

“Oh, it’s you,” he realized. “Damn. Don’t tell Steve.”

“Where am I?” Barnes asked.

“The soldier’s room in the penthouse,” Tony replied. “Speaking of which - you are not authorized to be here. You aren’t authorized to be here, and you have heard nothing about anything I’m working on for SHIELD-”

“Ow, stop it!” Barnes hissed as Tony began to pull him out of the bed. “I’m moving! Jeez - and I know about the drones, Stark. Natasha was talking about them last week-”

“Fine, but you don’t know anything about any progress I may or may not have made with them, capice?”

“Were you - were you going take the Winter Soldier out of the tower so that you could fuck around with SHIELD tech with him?” Barnes hissed as Tony finally got him out of the soldier’s room and into the hall.

As Tony continued to shove Barnes into the penthouse living area, Tony said, “No. Why on Earth would you think that? I swear to Thor, if you so much as even hint to Steve that I was going to do any such thing-”

“You’re damn right I’m gonna to tell Steve!” Barnes snapped, firmly planting his feet on the ground and shoving Tony away from him. “What part of any of that plan seems like a good idea to you? What if he hurt someone?”

“I doubt anyone would get hurt,” Tony said with a roll of his eyes. “The bombs I put in the drones are color bombs. The powder is non-allergenic, and it doesn’t even stain clothing! It’s less surprising than most of the stuff which people see on the streets of New York, and only mildly disruptive-”

“I’m not talking about the drones, Stark! I’m talking about innocent people who might bump into
him or set him off or piss him off—"

“I think you’re confusing the Winter Soldier with the Hulk,” Tony snorted. “He is capable of self control, you know, and I don’t think he has an instant kill mode or anything—”

“You’re right. He probably doesn’t,” Barnes seethed. “But probably isn’t good enough! Just… use your head! What happens if something sets him off?”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know, the same thing that happened last time?”

“Last - what last time?” Barnes asked, his brow furrowing.

“Last time something set him off,” Tony answered with a snide twist of his lips. “Which is to say that nothing happened. Well, not nothing. He came and woke me up in the middle of the night. Usually that would piss me off, because beauty sleep, you know? I need it from time-to-time. I wasn’t too upset, though, because it was a good excuse to go down to the Blast Zone and science it up.”

“Blast Zone?” Barnes weakly repeated. “Science?”

“The Blast Zone - Stark R&D product testing facilities. The soldier operated the pyrotechnics, Melony and I took data. It was fun and productive. Unlike the outing we were supposed to go on this morning, which was only going to be fun and not productive in any way.”

“He’s interacting with other people now?” Barnes asked, still frowning.

“All the time,” Tony replied. Listing off his fingers, Tony told him, “He interacts with cab drivers and food industry employees whenever I send him to pick up take-out, he’s on a first name basis with everyone in security and even joins them for poker nights every now and again, and he watches Animal Planet with Rhodesy - You’re gonna love this. One of their favorite shows is called Monsters Inside Me. Half of the episodes are about naturally occurring parasites which affect people’s neurological functions.”

“Good Lord above,” Barnes sighed, running a hand over his eyes.

“Yeah,” Tony dryly agreed. “You know it's bad when the trigger-happy psychopath has more friends than you do.”

“Stop,” Barnes demanded.

Rolling his eyes, Tony went to the kitchen, hunting down a thermos and debating whether or not Rhodesy might be amenable to terrorizing the good people of New York for a couple of hours. The two of them used to get into all sorts of trouble together before Rhodesy had gone strait-laced when he started getting promoted in the military. Tony was sure that Rhodesy would like to indulge once again, but at the same time, Rhodesy was one of those pesky people who was mindful and considerate of others, and he prefered shenanigans which didn’t directly interfere with people’s daily lives. Maybe -

“You gave him a room in the penthouse?” Barnes asked.

“What? Yeah,” Tony hummed as he considered the pros and cons of taking the drones to the park vs taking them to touristy places, instead. My grandmother got color bombed by a superhero while visiting Time Square and all I got was this stupid t-shirt.

“Why?” Barnes asked. “There are plenty of rooms available on the Avenger’s floor. There are
rooms available in Steve’s and my suite.”

“The dude doesn’t want to live with a bunch of people who hate him -slash- are scared of him -slash- don’t trust him -slash- who he doesn’t trust not to fuck with his shit. He was pissed when he realized that the glass of the butterfly box I gave him for Christmas had cracked when you tossed it in the trash. I had to buy him four more before he quit bitching about it.”

“And he… he goes outside? He goes outside and people don’t recognize him?”

“Oh, they recognize him,” Tony informed Barnes. “He gives them high-fives when they greet him as Winter Soldier. When they address him as Bucky Barnes, he gives them this ‘Aw, shucks’ spiel which you would find absolutely humiliating. The guy’s a fucking troll,” Tony finished with a laugh.

At this, Barnes was quiet for several long moments. Then, he quietly asked, “So what exactly are you doing with those drones?”
“What?” Barnes asked when he noticed that Tony was staring at him.

“Do you remember anything?” Tony asked. “From your time as the Winter Soldier?”

Frowning, Barnes shook his head. “Not really. When I woke up in Wakanda, I remembered a few things from… the end of it. Running after escaping Hydra, mostly. Why?”

Tony shrugged. “Winter remembers.”

His face growing pale, Barnes asked, “Even…”

“My parents?” Tony finished with a dry smile. “Yeah.”

Quietly, his voice almost a whisper, Bucky asked, “Have you tried saying the words to him?”

“We’ve talked about it,” Tony revealed. “He said he doesn’t think they would work. He doubts he would be able to act independently in any way if they still could. Winter's the weapon Hydra created, and whatever they did in Wakanda, it destroyed the user interface which made him a machine.”

“Oh,” Barnes said, relaxing a bit. He turned back to the soggy cereal he was pushing around his bowl, and Tony turned back to his tablet, sipping at his coffee and absently munching on the muffin he’d grabbed for breakfast. Checking the time on his tablet, Tony decided he had twenty minutes before Vision arrived in the communal kitchen, and then they could head out for the day.

It was only a few moments before Barnes suddenly asked, “Why are you telling me this? You’ve hardly shared any information on the Winter Soldier since you started interacting with him.”

Again, Tony shrugged. “You hardly ever ask.”

“What? Of course I do!”

“No,” Tony slowly drawled. “Steve backs me into a corner and demands I relinquish all information pertaining to the Winter Soldier every couple of weeks. It’s none of Steve’s business. You, however, share a body with the guy.”

“Steve’s my best friend,” Barnes argued. “He’s looking out for me. How isn’t the Winter Soldier his business?”

“Because he’s not the Winter Soldier’s friend,” Tony replied. “You know why I asked you if you remembered your time with Hydra? It’s because Winter doesn’t remember any time before Hydra. He doesn’t remember Brooklyn, growing up with Steve, the Howling Commandos, or anything about the war. The first time he met Steve Rogers was in DC. He doesn’t know Steve, and he doesn’t like Steve.”

“Oh,” Barnes weakly replied, his eyes wide.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Oh.”

Tony was having a bad week.
Word of Wanda’s mind-fuck of the Avengers in Sokovia had apparently gotten around the criminal underground, and the Avengers’ last call to action had involved time-loop prisons, dreamscapes, and nightmares. And ever since that nasty Tony Stark - Tell All had gone to press which included detailed information about his flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and hair-trigger reactions to certain stimuli, the baddies had decided that Tony was the Avenger of Choice when it came to testing the effectiveness of their brain-torture devices.

Rhodey and Vision had gotten him away from the battle, and Lang had figured out how to disable the device which was affecting Tony, so he’d only been under for an hour or so.

In the time since, Tony hadn’t been sleeping, he’d started having regular anxiety attacks, and he was very, very jumpy.

Staying over at Peter and May Parker’s place for a couple of days had helped, but if he spent any more time away from SI or the Avengers, people would know just how severe the event had affected him, and Tony couldn’t let this become people’s primary method of attack against him.

He managed living in the tower for five days before he hit a bit of a snafu.

“Steve’s looking for you,” Wanda informed him as she passed through the communal kitchen. Tony paused in his task of rooting around one of the cabinets, looking for protein bars to stash in his workshop.

When she was gone, Tony said, “FRIDAY?”

“Captain Rogers is currently on a call with King T’Challa and several members of the Accords Committee, negotiating amendments to the chain of notification in the event of an emergency,” she reported.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Every fucking inch,” he muttered.

“I estimate that Captain Rogers will be finished with his call in ten minutes,” she finished.

“Takeoff in five,” he commanded.

“Sure thing, boss,” she chirped.

“Seriously?” Barnes asked, causing Tony to jump and drop the boxes he had appropriated from the communal kitchen.

Focusing on the other man, Tony watched as Barnes’ expression of incredulity melted into one of concern.

“I’m not - I’m not going to hurt you,” Barnes slowly said after a moment.

Blinking, Tony realized what he was doing. His right hand was thrown up towards Barnes in what might be construed as the universal signal of Stop or Stay Back, but was held at an angle which much more strongly suggested I’m going to repulsor you in the face.

His left hand had somehow found its way into one of the drawers holding utensils, and his fingers were gripped around a knife.

Forcefully exhaling, Tony dropped the knife onto the counter and pressed his right hand against his sternum. “Warn a guy, Barnes. Fuck.”
“I’m sorry,” he told Tony, hesitantly stepping into the kitchen. “I didn’t mean to… Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Tony said with a shake of his head, moving to toss the knife back into the open drawer and firmly shut it, then fumble with the number of boxes he’d dropped all over the kitchen.

“Here, let me help,” Barnes insisted, moving into the kitchen and navigating around the island to help pick up some protein bars which had fallen out of an already opened box.

“I don’t need help,” Tony snapped.

“Actually, boss,” FRIDAY put in, “If you want to take off in four minutes, you do.”

Twitching, Tony snarled, “Fine.”

Barnes trailed after him as Tony rushed to the workshop, dumping the protein bars on the shop’s couch and then hurrying to grab one of his suits and one of his tablets.

In the elevator, Tony told Barnes, “Thanks, bye,” as the doors opened to let the other man off at the communal floor.

“I’m coming with you,” Barnes stated, his eyes narrowed at Tony.

“Hell no,” Tony succinctly replied.

“Hell yes,” Barnes insisted, his jaw locking into a stubborn set.

“Look, I’m fine. I just need a couple of days out of the city-”

“You are not fine,” Barnes argued, “and I’m not letting you run off by yourself right now. Someone needs to have your back-”

“I’ll invite Rhodey-”

“He’s out of the country, Stark. I’m not leaving you alone.”

Tony opened his mouth, fully intending to inform Barnes that if he didn’t get out of the elevator, Tony would get into the suit and throw him out.

Before he could speak, however, the elevator doors closed and lurched into action, taking them up.

“FRIDAY, I swear to Thor-” Tony hissed.

“The quinjet’s ready to go,” FRIDAY replied, “and one of the members of the Accords committee has been called away on an emergency. Captain Rogers’ meeting is going to end sooner than expected.”

With an irritated sigh, Tony ran a rough hand over his eyes.

Moments later, Tony and Barnes were seated in the jet and flying towards the compound in upstate New York. Barnes sat in the copilot’s seat even though he didn’t know a damn thing about operating any sort of aircraft.

Tony glared at Barnes, and he thought the look indicated that if Barnes said a single damn word, Tony would open the bay doors and shove the other man out of the jet.

“You’re avoiding Steve,” Barnes immediately stated.
“I woke up on the wrong side of the bed and I’m not in the mood to deal with other people’s attitudes today,” Tony told him.

“Steve said the two of you had talked,” Barnes insisted. “He said you’d worked it out, and that you’d forgiven each other.”

“Well I had to tell him something to get him off my back,” Tony seethed. “And I’ve discovered that nothing works more efficiently than giving him exactly what he wants.”

His shoulders falling and his brow furrowing, Barnes murmured, “You lied?”

“Of course,” Tony replied.

“Why?” Barnes pressed. “If you - if you haven’t forgiven him, and if you’re still uncomfortable around him, then why wouldn’t you just tell him?”

“Because Rogers and I aren’t people who tell each other things,” Tony tightly replied.

“If he knew he’d try to fix it,” Barnes pressed.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Tony stated.

The compound wasn’t much of a compound, at the moment. After Wanda’s abrupt departure during the Avengers’ little conflict, Tony may have had a bit of a temper tantrum.

“The way the others talked, I thought there would be a hole in the floor, or something,” Barnes said, his eyes wide as he studied the half-demolished compound.

“There was a hole through several floors,” Tony corrected.

“Was… was there an attack while we were in Wakanda?” Barnes pressed.

“No,” Tony replied. “Over the years, I’ve become rather sensitive when it comes to people destroying my home. Usually when this happens, I retaliate by destroying the people who were responsible for the destruction to begin with. This time, since the people responsible for the destruction had fucked off to Wakanda, I retaliated by destroying their home, instead. I’m going to rebuild it and make it a clubhouse for the New Avengers. No residential suites included. Today is a… good time to get started on that particular project.”

“If you hate living with us so much, then why do you allow us to stay in the tower?” Barnes quietly asked.

“You know what they say - keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

“If you really believed that, I would be the one with a room in the penthouse, and the Winter Soldier would be bunking with Steve.”

Tony was surprised when he laughed. It had been a long, long time since someone other than Rhodey had made him laugh. It was difficult not to be a bit giddy, however, when he pictured Steve living with Winter. Let him see what it’s like to feel threatened while sleeping in your own bed, Tony spitefully thought.

“Are you jealous?” Tony asked after he had banished a vivid daydream about the Winter Soldier booby-trapping Steve’s suite. “I know there’s a lot of hype about living in penthouses, but the view from my floor isn’t actually that different than the view from the Avengers’ floor.”
“It’s not the view. It’s the coffee,” Barnes replied. “I may or may not sometimes wake up in the soldier’s room and pretend to be him for a few minutes just so that I can smuggle a mug of the stuff downstairs.”

Tony tsked. “Damn,” he muttered. “I thought the guy’s frequent appearances meant that he was just getting comfortable and taking control of the wheel more often.”

When Barnes remained silent, Tony’s gaze turned to the man, and he said, “Not that you don’t seem like a person who totally deserves to exist or whatever. It’s just, Winter’s my buddy.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get that,” Barnes replied. “Only… I think he is taking control more often. I mean… at first, he only ever wandered around at night every once in a while. I didn’t - none of us - had any idea he still existed. Now, I miss entire days, I wake up in strange places, I never know where I’ve been or what I’ve been doing…”

After a moment, Tony said, “Huh. I can see why you might find that unsettling.”

“Why does Bucky get a prototype of SI’s new StarkTech phone?” Clint asked with a pout. “You don’t even like Bucky.”


Narrowing his eyes at the woman, Tony recited, “If one Avenger gets a toy, all Avengers get a toy.”

“Fork ‘um over, Stark,” Natasha demanded with a pointed grin.

With a grin of his own, Tony told her, “There’s only one problem with your logic, princess.”

“The Bucky isn’t an Avenger argument doesn’t work anymore!” Scott called from the kitchen. “The UN granted him full membership a month ago!”

“Sure,” Tony agreed. “But Winter hasn’t been granted membership, and he’s not an Avenger. Bucky’s phone may have the prototype’s extended battery life and superior casing, but Bucky doesn’t have access to all the bells and whistles. Technically, Bucky’s using something which more closely resembles a Motorola from 2005 than the latest and greatest StarkTech. So if you’d like some antique Motorolas, I’d be happy to dig some out of the landfill for you.”

Leaning over the back of the couch to look at the phone in question at work, Clint scoffed. “This sure as hell doesn’t look like outdated tech.”

“That’s because Bucky uses the outdated tech,” Tony replied, vindictive amusement filling his chest. “Winter gets the fun stuff.”

To drive home the point, Winter’s metal arm shot up, he grabbed a fistful of Clint’s shirt, and he used his grip to fling Clint over his shoulder, across the living room, and into the couch on the other side of the coffee table. Clint landed face first in the cushions with an indignant yelp.

“House Rule Three,” the soldier intoned. “Do not invade an assassin’s personal space.”

Natasha was standing in an instant. Clint was scrambling over the couch to take cover behind it. Scott ran into the living area, instead of away from it.

“You’re him!” Lang cried, pointing accusingly. “How long have you been here?!”
“Long enough to judge you for your knowledge of children’s television,” Winter informed him, his eyes very judgmental indeed as his gaze met Lang’s for a moment.

“Hey, I have a nine-year-old daughter,” Lang defensively declared.

“Have you ever actually lived with her or spent enough time with her to watch cartoons?” Winter asked.

“Low blow, buddy,” Tony informed him. “Other than poor impulse control, Scott’s not actually a bad guy.”

“Yeah!” Lang agreed. “Wait, what?”

“Besides,” Tony continued, nudging the soldier with his elbow. “You watch cartoons all the time.”

“The Justice League is of a different calibre than the Wonder Pets,” Winter pointed out.

“Buddy,” Tony chuckled as he looked over at Scott, “I’m pretty sure your daughter has outgrown the Wonder Pets.”

With a frown, Lang told him, “The Wonder Pets is what Cassie watched when I did live with her.”

“Aww,” Tony said, legitimately feeling sorry now. “Winter, let Scott use your phone to facetime with his daughter.”

Scott responded with a roll of his eyes. “I’m not using the tiny little screen on that phone when I can facetime my daughter on the television in my room. Also, it’s Thursday. She’s in school.”

“No one is going to lay a single finger on this device. Not for anything,” Winter promised as he sifted through apps. “It’s bad enough that Barnes even gets to touch it.”

“Wait,” Scott said, moving further into the sitting area as he eyed the soldier. “If you use the same phone, then your phones should have the same features.”

“Barnes and Winter have different pass codes,” Tony explained.

Winter snorted. “Someone needs to teach Barnes about digital security. Using a four digit code is one thing. Using the year of his birth as the code is something else entirely.”

“I told you not to hack his settings,” Tony sighed.

“It’s hardly considered hacking if I was granted access while using the first number which came to mind.”

“If you messed with anything, change it back,” Tony demanded.

“No,” the soldier hummed. “He can change it back himself - it will be a good lesson in navigating modern technology for him.”

Scott shook his head. “I’m sorry. But this is so weird right now. One of the nicest guys I know is being an ass. To himself. Just. What?”

“I’m not Bucky Barnes,” Winter declared as he stood from his place on the couch, slipping his new phone into his jeans.

“Where ya going, Frosty?” Tony asked.
“Blast Zone,” Winter replied. Nodding to the opposite side of the living area, where a door was closing, he said, “Widow and Hawk are running to tattle. I’m getting out of here before Captain America shows up and tries to appeal to my sense of friendship or brotherhood or some shit in an attempt to put his bestie back in the driver’s seat.”

“Wait for me,” Tony demanded as he hurried to gather the R&D schematics he’d been reviewing that morning. As soon as Tony indicated that he wanted away from the common area, Winter started helping him gather the blueprints.

“Hey, what about me?!” Lang hurried to ask. “It’s not even 10:00am yet - it is way too early in the day to be subjected to an interrogation from Captain America. Or worse - Steve’s expression of betrayal when he finds out I let you two run off.”

Tony met the soldier’s eyes. After a moment, Winter gave an almost imperceptible shrug, so Tony said, “What the hell. Come on down - I’ll give you a tour of the labs while Winter blows things up in the name of progress.”

“Whoa, deja vu,” Tony said by way of announcing himself as he took a seat in one of the recliners sitting catty corner from the couch Barnes was occupying.

“What?” Barnes asked.

“This right here? This is the exact situation which occurred when I first met the Winter Soldier. Therefore, I will say to you the exact same thing I said to him... Seriously?”

With a wry smile, Barnes told him, “If this is a repeated conversation, it should probably be repeated with the Winter Soldier. It’s his book.”

His eyebrow raising, Tony asked, “Oh?”

“I think he may have fallen asleep while reading last night - I woke up with this book on my face this morning.”

“Oh,” Tony said, far less interested than he was a moment ago. Watching Winter's reaction to finding out that Bucky Barnes had stolen a book out the the soldier’s room would have been very entertaining.

“Yeah. I thought I’d take a look at it - he’s clearly read it before. It’s all marked up and there are whole sections which are highlighted. Although personally, I don’t see the appeal. The movie was way more entertaining.”

With a roll of his eyes, Tony said, “Of course the movie was entertaining. The movie was about a monster. There were fight scene and attacks from mobs and all sorts of drama. The movie wouldn’t have been very popular if it was about a bunch of guys who sat around and talked a bunch before quietly dying.”

“The book’s about a monster, too,” Barnes pointed out. “It’s a horrible creature, and this thing killed people.”

Tony blinked at the other man and then glanced down at the well-worn book and the place he had marked with his finger. “You haven’t gotten to the creature’s narrative yet, have you?”

His brow furrowing, Barnes asked, “The creature’s narrative? How could it have a narrative? It can’t talk.”
“I reiterate - they had to do something to make the movie interesting,” Tony scoffed. “The creature in the book was highly intelligent. He mastered language and taught himself to read in a matter of months.”

“That… makes it worse,” Barnes told him as he sat up and dropped the book onto the couch beside him. “If it was intelligent, that means it killed Victor’s brother on purpose.”

“Sure,” Tony agreed. “Because he couldn’t see that he had any other way to express his anger. The doctor created this great horrible being and then abruptly abandoned him without any explanation or offering him any assistance. The first thing the creature learned of life was that people feared him. When he first saw his own reflection, he feared himself. He was alone, he was angry, and he was scared. Every person he came into contact with violently rejected him. When that’s all he knew of life, why should anyone expect him to go up to Victor or his brother and offer a handshake, a well-aged scotch, and pleasant conversation?”

Barnes was frowning. “But…”

With a sigh, Tony stood. “In that book, the creature’s not the monster, Barnes. Frankenstein is the monster. No one ever remembers that, though, because the creature was the ugly one. Just… keep reading.”

Barnes still seemed unsettled - and he would be until he finished reading, Tony was sure. He gave the man’s shoulder a sympathetic pat as he made his way to the elevator with plans to watch television in his own rooms.

If anyone asked, Tony could truthful tell them that yes, he had spent time on the common floor that day.

Tony didn’t drink often.

Not anymore.

Pepper had gone to Chicago to negotiate a merger (takeover, whatever). Rhodey was at the compound in upstate New York for a meeting with Hope van Dyne to discuss establishing a new team and a new base. Vision promised to keep out of the penthouse for the evening.

“What’s the occasion?” Winter asked when he emerged from his room after a long day spent assisting SI security in establishing emergency protocols for the tower’s employees. Winter poured two fingers of scotch for himself as he asked the question.

“Anniversary,” Tony simply replied.

“Ah,” the man hummed. “This is a tradition of yours?”

Tony hummed, remaining otherwise silent as Winter slumped into the cushions next to him, leaving the bottle on the coffee table in front of him and within easy reach.

Tony didn’t like it when people bothered him on this day - he never had. Ever since the death of his parents, Tony had claimed this day for himself. It was the only day which really belonged to him. No SI, no work, none of his friends, and nothing public. It was the one day of the year when he didn’t have to pretend. Not in any way or for anyone.

Beside him, the soldier remained quiet, finishing his drink and then pouring himself a second.
Tony did the same, although technically, the drink he poured was his fourth.

A long time passed, and Tony was halfway through his fifth drink before he spoke.

“Technically, this is a reverse tradition,” he stated. “For most of my life, this was the only day of the year when I didn’t consume a single drop of alcohol, even though it was the day I wanted it most. Through good or bad, I would never drink on this day of the year.”

“Why not?”

With a bitter smile, Tony replied, “Because during all that time, I thought that this was the anniversary of the day when my father’s drinking got him and my mother killed. You know what’s really fucked up? I knew there had been a cover-up. I knew that people were lying when they told me how my parents died. But I thought I knew what they were lying about. I mean, my parents were a big deal - SI was a big deal. It would have been really, really bad for a lot of people if it was reported that my parents had been killed because my father was driving drunk.”

Next to him, the soldier made a strange noise deep in his throat. Tony took a long, shaky breath, then gulped back another sip of his drink.

“I blamed him,” he weakly admitted. “For thirty years, I blamed my father for taking my mother away from me. For abandoning me. Do you know what that’s like? To be overwhelmed with rage and contempt every time you think about one of the people who you love and admire most in the world? For fuck’s sake, the first time I went to rehab, I spent three months trying to figure out what was wrong with me that I still valued his opinions and wanted to be someone he would be proud of. I warred with myself for years because logically, I wanted to be nothing like him, and yet I found myself striving to imitate him. All of that… all of the time and energy I spent hating him, all of the time I spent hating myself… And it was for nothing.”

“Jesus. Stark, I’m sorry. I am so, so, sorry.”

Blearily, Tony blinked and looked to the man who sat at the couch beside him. “Barnes?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” the other man repeated.

“What for?” Tony asked as he tilted his head back against the cushions as he slouched further into the seat, the alcohol and his exhaustion finally, finally catching up to him. “You didn’t do anything. Hey - hey, where’s Winter? I want to talk to Winter. I like that guy - he doesn’t get all weepy during emotions, and he doesn’t apologize for shit he can’t change.”

Exhaling sharply, Barnes slammed the tumbler he held onto the coffee table, snarling, “Fuck. Stark, what has happened to you? What happened that you’re more eager to interact with a murder, the man who killed your parents, than people who are good?”

“There’s no such thing as good,” Tony replied. “Good is nothing more than a faulty concept which people have created in an attempt to establish order and structure in a chaotic universe. Good is something which people pretend to be in order to manipulate others and convince them that some beings are superior to others. Winter’s smarter than to fall for that bullshit, though. He knows - he understands. There’s no such thing as good.”

Sighing, Barnes muttered, “You’re drunk.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed with a sigh of his own.
“Seriously, why do you like the Winter Soldier so damn much?”

“Seriously? I just told you,” Tony replied. “He’s one of the only people I know who doesn’t lie to my face about who and what he is.”

At this, Barnes gave a groan, except his sharp exhalation didn’t sound like resignation, but irritation.

However, Barnes didn’t seem irritated as he gently removed the tumbler from Tony’s hand and told him, “Come on, Tony. Let’s get you into bed.”

Tony was turning 45, and this was apparently a Big Deal.

He was perfectly aware that he was one of the older Avengers, thank you. He didn’t think people needed to get worked up until he had half a century under his belt, though.

When he mentioned this to the others after they declared they would be throwing a party for him, Clint responded by saying, “It will be a miracle if you live to fifty.”

Later, when they bumped into each other on the elevator, Natasha asked, “Since when do you dislike people celebrating you?”

“Since my parties started resulting in massive amounts of destruction,” Tony easily answered. “Once is an anomaly, twice is a coincidence, and three times is a pattern, you know.”

Ticking off her fingers, Natasha recited, “Your 41st birthday party, and the post-destruction-of-Hydra celebration. When was the third?”

“Oh, I wasn’t counting those,” Tony hummed. “By my calculations, I should have stopped throwing parties when I was sixteen. Better late than never, though, so-”

Rolling her eyes, Natasha told him, “Don’t get sensitive about your age now, Tony. You’ve had your allotment of midlife crisis. The team hasn’t had a good get-together in weeks, and they want to do something nice for you. Even if you don’t go to feed your own ego, do it for them.”

It’s my party, I should get to spend it alone if I want to, Tony pouted.

When the day of his birthday came around, Tony was delighted to find that Pepper had taken the initiative of inviting people other than his superhero-coworkers to the celebration.

Wanda made noise about allowing non-Avengers into the Avenger floors, but Happy shut her down as he sauntered out of the elevator and declared, “I’ve been dealing with Tony Stark’s explosive behavior longer than you’ve been alive, kid, and being an Avenger has nothing to do with it. Get it, Tony? Explosive? Because of what happened during your 25th birthday?”

“There were plenty of lifeboats and the rescue workers posed with us for pictures. It wasn’t that explosive,” Tony said with a grin as he moved to greet his friend. Going in for a hug, Tony quietly told him, “Thanks for coming.”

“It’s good to see you, boss,” Harry replied with a bright grin.

Around noon, May Parker turned up with a bunch of teenagers in tow.

Vision found Peter’s friend Ned highly fascinating, and Michelle quickly determined that the optimistic and sunny Scott Lang was easy pickings in terms of disturbing someone with her
unsettling behavior. The other members of Peter’s robotics club (which Tony was officially sponsoring) quickly took to harassing the rest of the Avengers.

“MJ and Olivia made the vegan cake, Ned and Joey’s parents helped them with the gluten free cake, and Peter insisted that we make you an ice-cream cake,” May told Tony as Peter easily carried the three cakes which looked to be precariously perched in his arms to the kitchen. “Where do we put presents?”

“Presents go next to the throne!” Darcy Lewis proudly declared as she and Jane Foster arrived.

“Throne?” Tony asked, immediately coming to attention. “As in… an Iron Throne?”

“Damn, Lewis,” Rhodey sighed. “It was supposed to be a surprise!”

“Oops!” Darcy unapologetically chirped. “Hello highly attractive middle-aged woman. Are you Tony’s new booty-”

“That’s my aunt!” Peter cried as he hurried back from the kitchen.

“Your aunt’s hot,” Darcy replied.

With a long sigh, Jane said, “Tony, you don’t get to sit in the throne or even see it until it’s time to unwrap your gifts. Darcy, give me the presents.” To May, she said, “I’ll show you where to stash your stuff.”

When Stephen Strange wandered into the party, wearing slacks and a cape, Tony blinked at the man.

“Long time no see,” he greeted as he shook Strange’s hand, frowning and looking down when the man’s hands didn’t feel… right, in his.

With a somewhat sad smile, the man asked, “Isn’t this where you welcome me into the club?”

With wide eyes, Tony asked, “No shit?”

“None,” his old friend (seriously old, as in Tony hadn’t seen Stephen Strange at any hoity-toity fundraisers in years) responded. Then, Strange pulled him into a hug. “Vision called me,” he quietly told Tony. “It’s… it’s nice to come out on the other side of things and see a familiar face.”

Swallowing hard, Tony quietly agreed, “Yeah. It is.”

Once they had pulled away from the embrace, Tony had a smile firmly stretched across his lips as he declared, “Welcome to the club, then! Come on, I’ll show you around and introduce you to the other Mouseketeers. If you want to stick around after your meet and greet, there will be three varieties of cake, and I can take you to the penthouse to choose a room.”

“Penthouse,” Stephen slowly repeated. “It’s been a while since I’ve hung out in one of those.”

Tony’s favorite visitor arrived just before Vision declared that it was time for presents.

Harley Keener came into the penthouse looking frustrated and harried. “Big cities suck,” he told Tony in greeting. “I refuse to ever ride the subway again!”

Tony was determined to change the kid's mind, so Tony pulled him into a fierce hug to show just how welcome he was. Tony ended up sneezing when the hug meant that his nose wound up in Harley’s hair.
“Jeez, you’re big,” Tony declared. “I see the puberty fairy has come to visit.”

Harley rolled his eyes. “You should have seen the video they made us watch in health class. There were no diagrams or pictures. Instead, Captain America told us about our changing bodies.”

“Oh my god, we had to watch that, too!” one of the girls from Midtown High’s robotics club loudly declared. “Hey, you know that guy’s here, right? MJ has been asking him really awkward questions about her menstrual cycle for the past half hour - want to come and watch?”

Harley blinked at Tony, and Tony grinned. “Go on, kid. Throw in some questions about how uncomfortable it is to wake up after certain types of dreams. We’ll catch up later.”

As the girl pulled Harley away, the boy said, “Don’t think for a moment I don’t know what you’re doing, Stark. I don’t care how many like-minded friends I could make here, I’m not moving to New York!”

“Say that again at the end of the night and I might actually believe you!” Tony called.

The throne was ridiculous.

First of all, it seemed to be a regular chair with a bunch of cardboard attached to it.

Second, it was covered in glitter.

“Not one word,” May quietly warned him, her tone dangerous even as she kept a wide smile on her face. “They tried to made you a real Iron Throne in shop class, and they were almost expelled for building weapons at school. They spent hours on that piece of junk. I’m going to have to hire professional cleaners to for my apartment - did you know that they sell glitter by the gallon? Because I didn’t know that they sold glitter by the gallon.”

“OMG, that is amazing!” Tony loudly declared.

And honestly? It kind of was amazing. The throne was a bit lopsided - there were way more glitter-swords on the left side of the throne than the right - and Tony was covered in annoying little flecks of gold the moment he came within a foot of the thing. It was clearly worthless and wouldn’t hold up for longer than it took Tony to unwrap his presents, but no one had ever done something like this before.

He’d had a throne at his 30th birthday party, and the thing had been deliciously gaudy. It had been ordered, though. The most effort anyone had put into its design was deciding that the cushions should be blue - complete strangers took care of the rest.

Tony’s Iron Throne was ridiculous, but he loved it regardless. He loved it so much that he couldn’t even be bothered to react in any way when someone muttered, “I’m surprised Stark didn’t just buy the prop from the television studio.”

People rarely bought Tony gifts. What do you buy for the man who has everything, after all? The answer: watches, apparently. Not a single gift-giving occasion passed where Tony didn’t receive at least five watches. This year, when the Avengers announced they were throwing Tony a party, he told them he didn’t want gifts, because he knew they would give him watches.

The people who knew him didn’t listen to his demands.

Vision bought him bacon. As in, Vision went to the kitchen, took a gift-wrapped package of bacon
out of the fridge, handed it to Tony so Tony could read the card and pull apart the wrapping paper, and then Vision deposited the bacon in the penthouse refrigerator.

“Whoa,” Harley murmured as he watched Vision float through the ceiling.

Tony laughed when he opened his gift from Harley - a scented candle that smelled like motor oil.

Like watches, Tony had plenty of ties. However, he didn’t have any ties which were covered in little cartoon pineapples. He also didn’t have any tie-dyed ties. He also didn’t have any ties which pictured a collage of horrifying clowns.

“Thank you?” Tony asked MJ as he nervously eyed the final tie.

“If you wear it around your neck, you’ll be the only person who doesn’t have to look at,” MJ reminded him.

“If I wear it around my neck, someone with magic might-”

“STOP!” Rhodey cried. “Don’t say it, Tony! Jeez, most of us already suffer from nightmares, and none of those nightmares require the addition of magic clowns!”

Before Tony could open his mouth and expound on the magic clowns idea, Lang wisely distracted Tony with another gift.

“From Cassie,” he informed Tony as he dropped an envelope into Tony’s lap, right on top of the horrible ties.

The envelope contained a well-drawn picture of Iron Man and Tony Stark holding hands while a birthday cake with candles floated in between them. The accompanying letter essentially said “thanks for saving the world and stuff and for keeping my dad out of jail. You should put fur on your suit.”

“Huh,” Tony said as he read through the letter again. “Awesome. I definitely know what she’s getting for her birthday.”

The next gift, surprisingly, was from Bucky.

Tony’s eyes flickered over to the man, who only responded by giving him a small smile and a raised eyebrow. “Whatcha waiting for?” he challenged.

Ripping into the suspiciously thick envelope, Tony blinked down at the post-it notes which were revealed, the packet rumpled and with “Coupon Book” sloppily written on the topmost post-it.

“Um, what?” Tony asked.

“FRIDAY says that you’re supposed to give someone who’s rich something they can’t buy for themselves,” Barnes told him with another grin. “Most of the coupon books I found online were for things like breakfast-in-bed and hugs, but I think they were also made by children, so…”

Ripping off the top post-it, Tony couldn’t help the delighted laughter which bubbled up in his chest.

“What’s it’s for?” Peter curiously asked.

“It’s a coupon for a Fake Emergency,” Tony declared as he began to flip through the post-its. “Good for one boring HR presentation. And - ha! There’s a coupon for a minor but highly
distracting confrontation with insistent journalists! And a Break Out of Jail (read: Hospital) Free card. And…”

Tony’s eyes widened at the various notes which said things like, “Get Steve Out of the Room” or “Distract the Avengers While Tony Makes a Get-Away” or “Publicly and Loudly Take Tony’s Side in an Argument” or “Take the Blame for a Misunderstanding.”

“I told you he would have liked getting personal coupons!” Ned loudly declared as he pouted at Peter.

Clearing his throat, Tony set the post-its aside and loudly asked, “Let’s see what you came up with instead, Neddo!”

The distraction worked - for a few minutes. Tony unwrapped a number of pleasant, thoughtful gifts before Vision handed him a present and informed him, “The card says it’s from the Winter Soldier.”

Tony ignored the strange noises which several people made at this announcement as he unwrapped the gift.

“Is that… another coupon book?” Rhodey asked.

“No,” Tony replied. “It’s… They’re pictures… I think… Winter may have given me blackmail material for my birthday.”

“He’s blackmailing you?” Natasha sharply questioned.

“No,” Tony said, a grin spreading across his face. “No, he’s not.”

Strange, of course, gave him a watch.

Tony was far more appreciative of this watch than any other he had ever received, however, when Strange told him, “The watch face will begin to glow a pale blue - a similar color to your reactor technology, I believe, whenever you are in the vicinity of magic.”

“Nice,” Tony declared as he instantly strapped the watch to his wrist.

At the end of the night, when he was alone in his room, Tony spread the incriminating photographs of the other Avengers, his political adversaries, and no-do-gooders who harassed him from time to time across his bed. After he pulled apart the post-it note coupons he had received and scattered them, as well, Tony began to organize his perfect day, in which when a situation went pear-shaped, he would be able to ensure that he was not responsible for taking the fall or straightening everything out.

Tony decided that this had been his best birthday ever.

It was 2:30 in the morning when Tony wandered into the communal kitchen to commandeer some leftovers from the fridge for his post creating-binge refuel. Slogging into the living area with his stolen goods, Tony collapsed on one of the couches and began to mechanically transfer food from the styrofoam carton to his mouth.

It took him several moments to realize he wasn’t alone.

“What’s up, Barnes?” he blearily asked the other man, who was slouched in one of the
recliners and angrily punching buttons on his cell phone.

“I’m trying to reset my phone settings,” the man irritably grumbled. “I’ve changed my pass code five times - I’ve even started using a seven digit code, but the Winter Soldier keeps working around it and messing with my settings.”

“The guy can be a real jerk sometimes,” Tony told him with a lazy smile.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Barnes muttered.

Tony thought about turning on the TV and ignoring Barnes’ pathetic attempts to master outdated technology, but Tony was tired. In his current state, he found that staring at the blank, black television screen was just as entertaining as anything which might be playing at this time of the night (morning, whatever), and the insistent sound of gentle clicking from Barnes’ phone was actually kind of soothing.

Tony’s food was almost finished when the elevator pinged down the hall, and then Wilson, Natasha, and Rhodey were stumbling into the common area.

“Ugh, I’m getting old,” Wilson complained as he slouched into the seat next to Tony, the man smelling of sweat and alcohol. “I thought that joining the Avengers would up my game.”

“No amount of superpowers can compensate for your lame dance moves,” Rhodey quipped. “I certainly didn’t have any problems.” Grinning, Rhodey pulled several torn bits of napkin from his shirt pocket, proudly displaying the numbers he had gotten that evening.

“Two of those numbers belong to government spies,” Natasha informed him as she shed the ridiculously tall heels she was wearing and adjusted her short skirt.

“Well, yeah,” Rhodey agreed as he stuck the numbers back into his pockets. “But I’m not going to go around dating a civilian, am I? Besides, spies can defect. They do it all the time.”

“Aim for the stars, Care Bear,” Tony said around a mouthful of food.

“Natasha’s happy to date a civilian,” Wilson grumbled. “She got more numbers than everyone else in the club combined.”

“It’s Natasha,” Rhodey argued. “Natasha doesn’t date. And Natasha was the one who taught me not to date civilians.”

“My code name is Black Widow,” she agreed. “I specialize in one night stands and booty calls.”


“You should have come with us, Bucky,” Natasha said as she finished pouring drinks at the bar and handed out the nightcaps to Rhodey and Wilson. “Steve says you used to be a real lady killer and you were such a good wingman that you were able to get him dates even before the serum. Wilson could have used you at his side.”

“I wouldn’t’ve done you any good,” Barnes replied without looking away from his phone. “I’m in the middle of a sexuality crisis or something.”

“Um, what?” Wilson asked.

“I think I might be bi? I don’t know. Thinking about guys wasn’t exactly allowed where - when - I
come from, and I certainly enjoy women, so it was never a problem. But now it is allowed, and even though I would have been perfectly happy continuing with my heterosexual lifestyle, the soldier’s been metaphorically shoving dicks down my throat. And possibly literally. I don’t know.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Rhodey asked.

“He’s hooking up with one of Tony’s employees - a guy in security,” Barnes explained, his eyes still on his phone as he pressed at the screen. “I’ve woken up naked in the guy’s bed often enough that breakfast with him has stopped being awkward.”


“And,” Rhodey politely coughed while he worked out the terminology he wanted to use, “metaphorically?”

Barnes flashed them - literally - his phone. The home screen showed a very lewd picture of two very naked men doing very interesting things to each other. “Every time I set my background to an appropriate picture, he changes it back to something more explicit and then makes it more difficult to fix than the last. I find that I’m less upset about the pictures themselves than my inability to work the settings, and Robert is a very kind, handsome, and physically affectionate man, so yeah. Sexuality crisis.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a busy week,” Tony said with a yawn as he carelessly deposited his now empty carton of leftovers on the coffee table. Standing up with a stretch, Tony said, “I’m probably not going to remember most of this in the morning, or I’ll think it was a particularly interesting waking dream or something. So if you want me to have a conversation with Winter about respecting the boundaries of the guy he shares a body with or something, leave a note on the refrigerator.”

“Sure thing. Thanks, Tony,” Barnes said as he returned to his attempts at straightening out his phone settings.

As Tony made his way to the elevator, he could hear Natasha, Rhodey, and Wilson debating the merits of adding sexual harassment awareness training to the Avengers’ orientation manuals.

“We’d have to hire a small force of lawyers and psychologists just to deal with the ‘two people sharing the same body’ aspect,” Wilson was pointing out. “Is that really prudent when there’s only one person in the entire world suffering from that predicament?”

“There’s only one person now,” Natasha stated. “If working with the Avengers has taught me anything, it’s that if something happens once, it’s entirely possible that it will happen again. It will happen again, and it will be far more severe and far more dangerous. It would be nice to have a solid framework on hand if something like this were to-”

When the elevator doors closed behind him, Tony sighed. “What the fuck are you doing, Winter?” he wondered.

Usually, when it was Winter who woke up in the penthouse, the man would stumble from his room and into the bathroom, shirtless and with the jeans he slept in unbuttoned. Tony wasn’t sure what the man did for ten minutes in the bathroom, because it certainly had nothing to do with straining up. When he emerged from the bathroom, he made his way to the kitchen and did nothing to hide his metal arm, the warped and discolored skin around his shoulder, or the scars littering his chest and back, and he made no attempt to tame his bedhead. He also didn’t button his jeans.
Instead, he poured himself a cup of coffee and began doing what Tony like to call the “perimeter check” of the penthouse, inspecting the floor’s security features, taking stock of who was or wasn’t present in their rooms, and then eyeing the various buildings surrounding the tower as he finished his first cup.

On this morning, Winter went into the bathroom then immediately came back out, marching straight up to where Tony was lounging on the couch and trolling some tech sites, and Winter asked, “What the hell is this?”

Blinking as the man turned around and showed him his back, Tony let out a bark of laughter. Quickly, he sat up and snapped a picture.

“I said what the hell is-”

“It looks like Bucky Barnes is getting his sweet, sweet revenge,” Tony cackled. “I think something from that sexual harassment and consent seminar might have struck a chord with him.”

“What is it?” Winter snarled once again.

“According to Google, it’s a Palos Verdes Blue,” Tony informed him, glancing from the picture on his phone to the Winter’s back. “Wow, look at the detail on that thing. Barnes must have done a lot of research to find someone who does such fine work-”

Abruptly turning back to face Tony, Winter snarled, “This is excessive retaliation. Just because I set a few dick pics as his user interface doesn’t mean he has any right to give me a tattoo.”

“Buddy, I don’t think this is about the dick pics. I think this is about how you’ve been getting down and dirty with your guy Robert.”

“Rob and I had the ‘just friends, no more benefits’ conversation weeks ago,” Winter said with a deep frown. “No. This is about the home screen. It’s not my fault that son-of-a-bitch can’t work a remote control.”

“Wait, what? Winter, have you been fucking with more than just his cellphone?”

“This is too much,” Winter snarled, his eyes narrowed and his lips twisted in fury.

“As far as tramp stamps go, it’s not bad. A butterfly is a little cliche, but at least it’s a tasteful butterfly. It’s a good size, beautifully done, and the color suits you. I mean, he could have gotten an arrow and the words ‘insert here,’ but instead he gave you some real art. Honestly, Winter? You should take this for what it is - a cry for help.”

“Excuse me?” the man flatly asked.

“You share a body with the guy,” Tony pointed out. “He may not have been aware of that at the beginning, but he’s had enough time to get used to the idea. You should probably think about establishing a line of communication with him.”

“You’re serious,” Winter intoned after a moment, his eyes carefully assessing Tony.

“Of course. I’m the only person who really interacts with both of you, and I’ve never been complemented for my skills as a mediator or an interpreter,” Tony pointed out as he settled back into his chair. “You two should probably figure out how to talk to each other without involving a bunch of other people or resorting to passive aggressive body modification.”
“Stop making this sound reasonable,” the soldier commanded.

Abruptly sitting up on the couch, Tony pointed an angry, accusing finger at the man. “There! You see?! I’m having to act like a rational, reasonable adult right now, Winter. I should never, at any point in time, be the responsible member of any group of people!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” the soldier groaned.

“When Pepper finds out, you are going to be in so much trouble,” Tony insisted.

“If you drank the last of the coffee, I’m locking you out of your workshop for a week,” Winter declared as he made an about turn and started back towards the bathroom.

“You don’t have the clearance,” Tony argued.

“You may have Potts on your side, but FRIDAY likes me better!” the man called before slamming the bathroom door behind him.

“She does not!” Tony yelled back. Then, after a moment’s pause, he muttered, “Crap.”

Putting his phone aside, Tony stood and made his way to the kitchen in order to start a fresh pot.

It wasn’t personal.

The attack was focused on a military base near the Pentagon. That was personal, certainly. FRIDAY managed to track down the info on the man leading the attack - former military, dishonorably discharged, went on to create himself a techno doomsday cult. Going for that particular military base was personal. For him.

The use of technology and parts scavenged from Ultron’s Iron Legion meant that the Avengers had to be called in to stop the madman, his people, and their tech. That part wasn’t personal, either. Not really. But the military, the government, and the press sure made it seem like it was personal.

Once again, it was Tony Stark’s fault. It was his fault even though he had never met the man leading the charge, Tony had never had any contact with him or his people, Tony had been barred from entering Sokovia in order to properly dispose of the Iron Legion’s scrap, and the scrap in question had been so drastically altered and reworked that it took Tony a while to even realize that Iron Legion scrap was what some of the weapons were made from.

Wanda was giving Tony the same side-eye that she’d given him before she and the others had fucked off to Wakanda. Clint wouldn’t look at him at all. Steve was valiantly attempting to hide his frustration and disappointment. The one time Tony caught Steve looking in his direction, the man was wearing the expression which indicated that he was asking himself why he had ever trusted Tony in the first place.

As the Avengers stood just beyond the stage and out of view of the press, still battered from the fight and waiting for the government representative to call them out to report (to answer for themselves), Tony took a look around himself and at his team.

It was Leipzig/Halle all over again, only worse, because this time they were supposed to be on the same side - a team.

Rhodey stood firmly at Tony’s back, glowering at the curtain which separated them from the press conference and the audibly angry mutterings which were already drifting from the crowd. Vision
was attempting to comfort Wanda with a supportive hand on her shoulder, but he was also conveniently standing in a way which ensured that his body blocked her view of Tony.

Scott was biting his lip, his eyes darting from Tony to the other Avengers, poised as if he was afraid he’d be asked to choose sides again.

Sam was huddled with Natasha and Steve, the three of them speaking in low voices.

His jaw set, Tony said, “You know what? Fuck you. The lot of you can go to hell.”

Steve had the gall to blink at him with big, blue, surprised eyes. “Tony, what-”

“Strait to the fiery, burning pits of a hell which I don’t actually believe exists but I sure as shit wish *did* just so that you could all go there and *rot,*” Tony snarled as he began to assemble his armor in order to go home. “I am not taking the blame for this one.”

“How about,” Lang said, holding up his hands. “No one blames you for anything-”

“Bullshit. Three years ago, I was one of dozens of the people responsible for creating a homicidal robot. But does anyone talk about Hydra? No. Does anyone talk about Bruce? No. Does anyone talk about the fact that I’m *forced* to house the woman who *fucked with my head* and helped to *destroy* not only my home, but her own home as well? *No.* I’m the only one who ever gets the blame, even though I didn’t do it alone. Even though I didn’t do it under my own power or by my own choice. Even though I was the only one of *any* of you to try and fix it, to make it better, or to clean up the mess. So why is it that three years later, I’m still taking the fall for bullshit that I had no part of? Why does the ‘I had no choice’ argument pertain to Bucky Barnes, but not me? Why am I the person who has to go out and stand in front of all those people and apologize for the horrible thing that happened today but which I had no knowledge of or part in? Why does this get to be my fault?”

Her expression twisted, Wanda snapped, “Your Iron Legion was used in the attack today-”

“My Iron Legion was destroyed when a robot controlled by an alien energy device which *you put in my hand* tore through my home!” Tony roared at her. “The Iron Legion used in the attack today was *Ultron’s* Iron Legion! The Iron Legion he created in Sokovia! With your help! With your help after you agreed to enter into an alliance with him! The Iron Legion I tried to go back for and clean up after! Today didn’t happen because of me! It happened because the people of Sokovia wouldn’t let me into their country and they did a shit job of cleaning up and disposing of a bunch of weapons! Today happened because of Ultron! And if we’re not putting blame on the guys who were actually responsible for the attack, then today happened because of *you*!”

“How about,” Clint reminded him with a bitter frown. “It didn’t work when Loki attempted to use it against you.”

“It didn’t work because of the arc reactor, you idiot,” Tony replied with a bitter sneer of his own. “The reactor intercepted and absorbed the energy. And guess what I had removed *months* before we went to Sokovia?”


“You know what’s not convenient?” Tony snarled at the man. “It’s not convenient when things go
wrong. It’s not convenient when bad things happen. It’s not convenient when the people you’re supposed to rely on and trust abandon you to pick up the pieces and put them all back together. But you wouldn’t know about that, would you? You were conveniently ensconced in Wakanda, sipping mojitos and sunbathing while I dealt with the shitstorm you left behind. Well guess what? Bucky, I’m calling in my coupons.”

Barnes gave a put upon sigh from where he stood at the edge of the group, thus far staying out of the argument.

“Figured as much,” he muttered as he moved forward and watched as Tony popped one of the compartments of his suit open and grabbed what he had taken to calling his Rainy-Day Stash of coupons and incriminating pictures. Barnes easily accepted the hand-off and scowled as he leafed through the jumble of post-it’s and pictures. Mumbling to himself, Barnes said, “The Winter Soldier was aware that bits of Ultron’s army were being smuggled out of Sokovia, of course. My memories of it are foggy, and after the deprogramming in Wakanda, I didn’t have the technical know-how to understand what it was I had seen. I thought Mr. Stark’s Iron Man armor seemed familiar. I should have spoken up.”

“Bucky,” Steve breathed, his face going pale. “What are you-?”

“Turns out it’s real, real easy to make someone out as the villain,” Barnes told Steve with a bemused grin. “Tony’s not takin’ the fall today. I am.”

“Bucky, you didn’t have anything to do with what happened here!” Steve insisted.

“I had more to do with it than Stark did,” Bucky dryly replied. “Steve, I had to make money somehow when I was on the run. I wasn’t making stuff up about witnessing the materials being smuggled out of Sokovia.”

“That wasn’t you,” Steve said again.

“Wasn’t Stark, either. But he’s right - someone’s gotta take the fall, and the people out there aren’t talking about the guy who actually attacked a military base today. They’re talking about us. Tony - fly safe. I’ll see ya back at the tower.”

Tony’s faceplate snapped shut and Tony saluted Barnes before starting away from the conference. He was halfway back to the tower before he realized that he didn’t feel overwhelming rage anymore. Now, he kinda felt sort of guilty.

“Shit,” Tony sighed.

The team meeting was mandatory, of course. Vision was sent to collect (escort) Tony and everything. Tony felt like he was being marched to his execution as they entered the communal floor and found the rest of the team waiting in solemn silence.

Once Tony was seated at one of the couches, Vision and Rhodey seated on either side of him, Tony was surprised when it was Lang who raised his hand and started speaking first.

“Can I just say that it is super awkward that I fought with you guys in that battle at Leipzig and then lived with a bunch of you for a year and never heard about any of the baggage that you lot are carrying around until yesterday?”

“This doesn’t involve you,” Natasha stated.
Before an argument could break out, already, Steve said, “Tony, we didn’t realize that you didn’t like Wanda.”

“I like Wanda fine. Liking her doesn’t change the fact that I don’t trust her, though,” Tony replied, and he was self-aware enough to admit that he took some pleasure from the visible cringe which this statement wrangled out of Wanda.

“Right,” Steve said with a tired, disappointed sigh. “Right, so we’ve talked about it, and we think that until we figure out what the problem is and how to fix it, Wanda and Vision should probably go stay at the compound for a while.”

“No can do,” Tony informed the man. “There’s nothing for you at the compound anymore.”

“What?” Wilson asked. “But… The compound is our home. Rhodey said we’d be able to head upstate again as soon as the new training facilities were complete.”

“Yeah,” Tony slowly replied. “So… I may have done a bit of remodeling while you were fucked off to Wakanda.”

“Remodeling?” Natasha slowly repeated, over-stressing each of the word's syllables.

“Remodeling, partaking in therapeutic mass destruction, po-tay-toe, po-tah-toe. Either way, the compound will henceforth be nothing but training facilities, and the only long-term sleeping quarters are located in the med-bay. I mean, you’re welcome to go and set up camp in the Crash Quarters, but it’s four to a room and you’ll have to keep all of your stuff in lockers, so… It might just be easier and more comfortable to hang out at the tower.”

With an aggravated sigh, Steve said, “Tony, why didn’t you talk to us about this?”

“You had fucked off to Wakanda after leaving me for dead in a frozen waste, Rogers. What was I supposed to do, call you up on that prehistoric trinket you sent me and talk about which walls I was going to leave intact? Or is this about my executive decision to make the sleeping quarters at the compound temporary sleeping quarters? Yeah, no. Next time you lot bulldoze my home, I’d like to be sure that you’re not bulldozing the only home of a whole bunch of other people, as well.”

“We need to talk about these things,” Steve insisted.

“It’s my money, I’ll decide how to spend it,” Tony stated. “What more talking do we need to do?”

“Tony, I don’t think you understand what your behavior is doing to the team,” Steve quietly and very carefully told him. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you about this for… for a while, really, but… The way you treat us sometimes… and these executive decisions… It makes us feel uncomfortable going to you about anything and sometimes… Sometimes people don’t want to include you.”

“Good,” Tony decided. “That means the next time you decide to go on some stupid crusade with guns ablazing, I’ll be able to use plausible deniability to keep from being taken down in the crossfire.”

“That’s not what Steve is talking about and you know it,” Natasha told him with narrowed eyes. “Stop misunderstanding everything and twisting people’s words on purpose.”

“Fine,” Tony snapped. “You want me to use small words? I can’t stand to look at any of you most days. I don’t like you and I don’t trust you.”

“We don’t trust you or like you either,” Clint snapped back. “After what you put Bucky through
yesterday? Not on your life.”


At this, Tony sighed and leaned back in his seat. Because he was not proud of how he had handled himself the day before. His actions had been petty and vindictive and cruel. “Yeah, that was a shitty thing to do. I shouldn’t have-”

“I wouldn’t have agreed to it if I couldn’t handle it,” Barnes loudly declared from his place on one of the recliners.

“It wasn’t your fault!” Steve hotly insisted, seeming more lively than he had during any of the conversation thus far.

“And it wasn’t Tony’s either!” Barnes argued. “That wasn’t going to stop any of you from letting him get run roughshod, though! You know what, I’m with Tony on this one. He doesn’t have any reason to like you, and he doesn’t have any reason to trust you! You talk a big game about teamwork and loyalty and trust, Steve Rogers, but none of you have ever behaved as if Tony was your teammate.”

“Thank you!” Rhodey crowed. “That is exactly what I’ve been trying to say! All of you treat him like the money-backer that you gave honorary membership to out of obligation!”

“Tony has taken hits for everyone - all of us. But who takes hits for him?” Vision quietly asked.

“Look,” Tony said. “I’m sorry I put Barnes out there like that - it wasn’t fair and it was a shitty thing to do. Yes, I acted impulsively. It should have been Steve or Wanda or the Widow who I threw under the bus. Because you know what? Barnes is working to make up for his past mistakes, which none of you have ever done. You beat me down and shit all over everything I work for and I’m left to clean up the mess, but you always come out on the other side smelling like roses. Barnes and Rhodey are right. I’m not a part of your team. I’m your scapegoat, and I’m not, I repeat, I am not letting you treat me like that anymore. We clear on that? Good, awesome. Great team meeting, guys. Super productive.”

Tony stood from his seat and quickly made his way towards the elevator. Neither Rhodey nor Vision attempted to hold him back. As the doors closed behind him, Tony could here Barnes say, “Sit down, Stievie. Going after him right now won’t help anything. Let him cool off and-”

“Oh please, Barnes,” Natasha interrupted. "At which point in that conversation were you helping anythin-"

As the elevator moved to deliver him to his workshop, Tony had to admit that the entire confrontation had left him a bit off-kilter. He had just aired a lot of grievances and years worth of turmoil and resentment.

Also, the “Publicly and Loudly Take Tony’s Side in an Argument” coupon hadn’t been included in the packet he’d handed off to Barnes the day before.
When Tony suggested that Winter and Bucky should try directly communicating with one another, he probably should have been more specific about what methods they used.

By the time Tony realized what was going on, it was too late - the notebooks and journals he bought and placed in Winter’s room went untouched, and the email account he set up for Bucky was primarily used to send people pictures of animals while Winter used his email to send people invitations to join pyramid schemes (Winter was turning into a real smooth talker - Tony had needed to reread the email invite three times before he realized why the business proposition Winter was suggesting sounded too good to be true).

“Sacrilege,” Tony accused while he sulked in the penthouse living area and watched Stephen Strange and Vision as they placed bookshelves along the far wall of the space. The shelves were nice, at least - Strange had found the antiques in an Asian market he liked to frequent.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Stephen murmured as he used a bit of magic to resize the bookshelves so that they expanded to take up all of the available space on the wall. “The tablet you gave me is amazing - and thank you for setting up an account which automatically buys and downloads the New York Times bestseller list. However, the tombs I study aren’t available in electronic form, and I would feel more secure if there were copies of them here at the tower in case anything happened to the Sanctum… again.”

“Don’t bitch at Strange, Tony,” Rhodey demanded from his place lounging on one of the couches. “It’s Winter who’s buying up bookstores. And let me tell you, at the beginning of all this, I would have been far less nervous about letting him into our space if I’d known that he would spend so much time sitting around reading children’s books.”

“The Harry Potter books may have initially been advertised and sold as children’s stories, but as the series progresses the underlying themes and principles of the story become far darker and-”

“Calm down, Viz,” Rhodey demanded. “We’ve already gotten you tickets for the Universal vacation package, and none of us have any right to judge considering the fact that we’ll be right there with you wearing robes and waving fake wands around.”

“And I would like to take this moment to say that yes, I find it highly amusing that my books on the mystic arts will be housed on the same shelves as the Harry Potter series,” Stephen put in.

When Tony groaned in annoyance (because seriously, the shelves could have gone into Stephen’s room if the shelves in Winter’s room weren’t already full to bursting), Rhodey told him, “If it bothers you that much, why don’t you talk to Winter about donating the books to libraries after he’s finished reading them? Or better yet, set him up with a tablet and an Amazon account like the one you gave Stephen?”
“He has a tablet and an Amazon account, and he can’t donate the books when he’s finished because he doesn’t just read them, you know.”

To demonstrate, Tony grabbed the fifth Harry Potter book from the stack which was about to topple off of the coffee table and he opened it to a random page. He held it out to Rhodey so the man could see the writing which filled the margins of the book’s pages.

“Apparently, the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes find that discussing literature is one of the only ways they can communicate without resorting to name calling and insulting each other’s mothers,” Tony informed him.

As Vision wandered over to take a look at the book, he said, “That seems rather counter-productive considering the fact that both men were in fact born from the same woman.”

“Winter has no knowledge or memory of her, though, and Barnes makes real mean ‘Your Mama’ jokes about Hydra,” Tony dryly informed him.

Reading over some of the notes in the margin of the book, Rhodey made a strange noise in the back of his throat. “Is this seriously four pages of Bucky Barnes and the Winter Soldier debating how best to kill Dolores Umbridge? In detail?”

“Everyone always forgets that Barnes was infamous for his sniper skills during the war, and he was very, very good at killing people even before Hydra started experimenting on him with super soldier serums,” Tony reminded the man. “And now do you see why we can’t donate any of this crap? At best, the conversations written out in those books would be highly incriminating if anyone got their hands on them. At worst, unsavory characters would be able to actually use the ideas and information which the two of them write out to carry out crimes of their own.”

Picking up another one of the books sitting around the living area, The Count of Monte Cristo this time, Vision murmured, “Their handwriting is different.”

“Sure,” Tony agreed. “Isn’t Winter’s cursive pretty?”

“Their situation gets more confusing by the day,” Rhodey complained with a sigh.

“Not really,” Tony argued. “Not if you remember that they are and always have been two different people.”

“I know that Steve can be a persistent asshole,” Bucky informed Tony. “I’ve been dealing with this guy since we were children. You think he was bad after he found out the Winter Soldier was still active and had access to the world through my eyes? Well now Steve’s even worse, and I’m the one he’s going after. Please, Stark. The knucklehead cares about you. He really does. I’m not asking you to forgive him. I’m not asking you to like him. I’m just asking for you to talk to him and make him understand where you stand.”

With an incredulous frown, Tony set aside his soldering iron and gave Bucky his full attention as he asked, “You’re really taking his side on this? Now?”

“I’m not taking anybody’s side,” Bucky argued. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re my friend and I want to support you. That’s why I’ll be there for the conversation. You and Steve have some shit
to work out, and neither of you are exactly easy to talk to, so I’m going to act as your translator.”

“Seriously?” Tony scoffed.

“Yes,” Barnes insisted. “Lord knows I’ll have a better chance of it than any of the other clowns we live with. And I promise I won’t let him cut you down. Just like I won’t let you cut him down. Please, Tony. Everyone has been on edge for weeks and the tension is making me suffocate. If you’re not going to do this for yourself, do it for me.”

“Wow. You’re really counting on this whole ‘us being friends’ thing to work out for you, huh?” Tony asked.

With a wry smile, Barnes told him, “I’m actually counting on your sympathetic sense of camaraderie to work out for me. Remember how Steve used to corner you and press for information on the Winter Soldier? He’s doing that to me now, about you. Help me get him off my back?”

“Damn it,” Tony said with a long sigh. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

The agreement was kind of worth it simply for Barnes’ resulting smile of relief. Tony totally understood; Steve was relentless when tackling a problem, and being on the opposite side of his Game Face was never pleasant. For anyone, apparently.

The rest of the team cleared out of the common room for them - Bucky nixed the idea of the three of them meeting in his and Steve’s quarters. Bucky said they needed to meet on neutral ground. He also denied them the option of going someplace out of the tower where there would be food. He said there would probably be yelling, and that while the people and press were fully aware of the existing divide within the Avengers, they didn’t need any evidence of just how bad it was.

As soon as they were gathered and sitting, Steve turned his sad, earnest eyes to Tony and said, “Look. I think—”

“Put a sock in it, Stievie,” Bucky immediately demanded. “I’m perfectly aware that Tony always has to have the last word, but just this once I think he should have the first word, as well. Tony, go ahead.”

“We’re not going to be a team again,” Tony immediately stated, his tone instant and resolute. “I don’t care how sorry you are, and it doesn’t matter what you do to try and make it better. It’s not going to happen, dead stop.”

Steve’s answering sigh was a sound of pure aggravation. “I know I made a mistake, Tony. I lost my temper is Siberia and I hurt you. I know that.”

“Siberia wasn’t a big deal,” Tony informed him.

“You’re using doublespeak, Tony,” Bucky suddenly put in. “Please use small words and give straightforward explanations to those of us who didn’t grow up in an environment where a single sentence could have a dozen different meanings.”

“What?” Steve asked.

“Fine,” Tony said. Sitting up straight, squaring his shoulders, and raising his chin, he looked Steve in the eye and said, “You never trusted me, Rogers. Not from the very beginning. You questioned my every thought, move, and decision even while we were fighting an invading alien army, and you never stopped questioning me after. Yet you demanded blind obedience from me. We were
supposed to be a team, but you made damn sure that there was never any doubt of who exactly was in charge.”

“Only because you would never work with the rest of us!” Steve argued. “Trust goes both ways! We tried to involve you in the team and you resisted every moment of it!”

“It wasn't the team I had a problem with - it was the team's insistence on working for SHEILD that I had a problem with! I thought I made my opinion of SHIELD clear from the very start,” Tony instantly replied. “I told you that I would have nothing to do with them, but you instantly and eagerly drank the Kool-Aid, and look how that turned out!”

“How was I supposed to know that they’d been infiltrated by Hydra? How could I have possibly known-”

“It wasn’t even about Hydra! Did you do any research on the organization before you signed on and started taking orders? Did you have any idea what they did, or what they would have you do?”

“Peggy helped to create SHIELD!” Steve argued. “Your father helped create SHIELD!”

“My father made shitty decisions and he was a shitty judge of character!” Tony argued back. “My father was involved in some really shady business, Rogers. He made weapons. His fortune was soaked in the blood of his enemies! He stole other people’s work and designs. He gave Thaddeus Ross an accommodation when the man was applying for a job in the DoD. He trusted Obadiah Stane to have his best interests at heart, even though Obi never left anyone with any doubt that all he cared about was money and power. I don’t think there’s a single thing which my father ever touched without royalty fucking it up. I mean, my father was the idiot who got his wife and himself killed because he was transporting five vials of experimental super soldier serum in the back of his civilian vehicle and-”

“Your father was an ass,” Bucky suddenly interjected. “We shouldn’t admire or emulate the guy. Got it, Stevie?”

With a frown and a furrowed brow, Steve said, “I never knew about any of that. Tony, you never told me.”

“Most of its public knowledge! If it wasn’t public, it was in the file which SHIELD had on me,” Tony pointed out.

“Besides a few lines about Stane, none of that was in your file!” Steve argued. “And there was never any mention of Stane and Howard working together! Stane was your business partner! If he was so horrible, why did you keep him at SI?!”

“Stane controlled SI for four years before I became eligible to take over, and by then I’d developed an addiction to cocaine and could hardly get out of bed and get dressed under my own power, let alone run an entire company,” Tony snapped back. “And guess who it was who introduced me to the people who taught me about the delight of drugs in the first place?! That asshole worked long and hard to keep me down, Rogers! It’s a miracle that I survived to the age of thirty, let alone the direct attack on my life which Stane orchestrated! And except for Stane's one direct attempt at murdering me, the rest of my life was so publicly documented that you can still find the before/after pictures of my stints in rehab! And that’s saying something considering the fact that most of those stints happened before the world wide web was a thing.”

“Doublespeak,” Bucky once again warned.
“For fuck’s - how is that doublespeak?!” Tony cried. “I’m spelling it out for him!”

“I know, but it hasn’t been spelled out before,” Bucky replied. “You’re glossing over a lot of information, and it seems like doublespeak. In fact, Winter had to explain most of your history to me. Like - Ivan Vanko is detailed in your file, but on paper he looks like a Russian copycat who was jealous of your fame and success and blamed you for his traitorous father’s death. Winter had to explain to me about how the arc reactor technology was originally designed by Vanko’s father, and that guy had been charged with criminal conspiracy before getting deported during the Cold War, a time in America’s history where Vanko could have easily been framed or he could have been branded as a Socialist sympathizer simply for trying to contact any of his family in Russia. I didn’t understand that the man wouldn’t have been in America and working for the government in the first place unless he had defected from the Communist Party by handing over some damning evidence to the US government before he was even allowed to enter the country. I didn’t understand that upon returning to the Soviet Union after being kicked out of the US, Vanko would have been treated as an outcast and a pariah by his former colleagues and the Russian government. You and Winter know what sort of environment that would have left Ivan Vanko to grow up in, and so when you talk about Ivan Vanko it’s with a different connotation than what the rest of us hear. You just know that he was raised in poverty and that he probably had to resort to crime at an early age just to get by, and he probably spent a lot of time in jail as a result. But without knowing the political and economical climate of that time, others would assume that he had just as many opportunities as the rest of us. You just know that he probably had a bad time of it in jail, and you just know how detrimental incarceration probably was to his brilliant psyche. You just know that the guy probably turned to alcohol to deal with his problems, and you just know how that further damaged him. You know exactly what Howard Stark did to that man and his family, and you assume that everyone else does, as well. You assume the same thing about Stane and his manipulations.”

“You spoke to the Winter Soldier about Ivan Vanko?” Tony asked.

“We read The Hunt for Red October a few weeks ago,” Barnes replied.

“The hunt for what?” Steve asked with a furrowed brow as his eyes flickers from Bucky to Tony and then back again.

“Fuck,” Tony said as he stared at Steve with wide eyes. But it was to Bucky he was speaking when he said, “You’re right.”

“What?” Steve repeated.

“You and I missed a few things over the years,” Bucky explained to his friend. “If the others got you caught up with current issues the same way they did with me… It’s likely that a lot of information was left out or skipped over during the explanation.”

Steve let out a harried sigh. “I know that. Clint calls it giving us the Cliff Notes. But what does that have to do with-”

“We haven’t been given a lot of information about a lot of things,” Bucky reiterated. “I was given the Cliff Notes on Tony Stark when I first moved into the tower, you know?”


“Exactly,” Bucky agreed.

Steve ran an agitated hand through his hair as he said, “We’ve always wanted Tony Stark on the
team. We’ve tried to make you a part of the team, Tony. And you always shot us down.”

“You’re still not listening, punk,” Bucky told Steve. “Tony spent over fifteen years being manipulated by a megalomaniac who Tony believed cared for him and was his friend. Tony’s file probably didn’t go into much detail about Stane though, did it? Not beyond his trying to have Tony killed in Afghanistan. If anyone had cared to read the full length novel instead of the Cliff Notes, they would have realized that Tony has some major issues with trusting people, especially people who wish to exert control over him, his company, and the suit. Not because he’s egocentric, or a control freak, or-or hoarding power or something, but because of the horrible things people have done and would do again if given half a chance.”

Steve grimaced, but then his brow furrowed. “If that were true, then why were you ready to subject us to the Accords, Tony?”

“Because people are scared of us,” Tony stated. “And for good reason. When we go into battle, we aren’t the ones who die. Half of the people on our team committed criminal offences even before gaining superhero status. And none of us have a good track record when it comes to minimizing collateral damage.”

“Bucky says you have trust issues. When the government wanted your suit, you called a bunch of senators ass-clowns. But then you turn around and decide that you want those same people calling the shots for us?” Steve pressed.

His lips pressed into a thin, angry line, Tony told Steve, “Did you know that Senator Stern, who led the committee attempting to confiscate my suit, was a Hydra operative? And do you know what happened after that day? I was fined for cussing on CSPAN, and neither Hydra nor the government got any of my tech. I wasn’t arrested for treason and my suit wasn’t confiscated because there is a system in place which allows me to protect myself and my interests. Is it a perfect system? No. Does it protect every person and every person’s interests? If it did, we’d be living in a fucking utopia, so I can say with certainty that it doesn’t. But it’s something. It’s something we need, it’s something everyone needs, if we’re going to survive and coexist with others.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that the example you gave included a member of Hydra who was holding and exerting power over others,” Steve dryly intoned.

“I reiterate - we don’t live in a utopia,” Tony slowly said. “There will always be people who weasel their way into power in order to do bad things. Like Thaddeus Ross when he imprisoned all of you-”

“You were working for him!” Steve hotly accused. “You knew he was bad news and you were on his side!”

“Oh for - Steve, you know what you should do? You should focus on the part of your job that involves punching people,” Tony declared. “Ross wasn’t going to keep his position! That useless piece of shit wasn’t going to last a week with us or the Accords.”

“Doublespeak,” Bucky chirped.

“If you say doublespeak at me one more damn time-” Tony seethed, now properly worked up.

“Relax,” Bucky demanded. Then, turning to Steve, he explained, “Working in politics isn’t easy, and neither is working in big business. Part of the reason laws are so wordy and complicated is because lawmakers want to establish precise boundaries and rules which everyone has to follow, and even then there’s more wiggle-room than most people are comfortable with within the law.
Tony’s lived in a world defined by those boundaries and he’s practiced working around those boundaries his entire life. He knows far more about how these things work than any of us. And now? I think Tony’s right. Steve, you don’t understand the politics which go on behind the Accords. I barely understand them myself, and I’ve been following the conferences and talks along with everyone else. I think Tony should be in charge of that part of the Avengers. And Tony, I think that your lone gunslinger mindset is too deeply ingrained for you to truly comprehend teamwork on the field. You get the mechanics of it, but you don’t understand the spirit behind it, and that’s what can make or break a team in battle. That’s what Steve is good at, though. So he should be in charge of the Avengers’ battles.”

Slowly, Steve told Bucky, “That’s… already how we were doing things.”

“Officially?” Bucky sardonically asked. “As in Tony’s word in regards to the Avengers’ legal situation is final, and your word in regards to battle-operations is final?”

“Buck, that’s doesn’t seem-”

“I am not.”

“Both of you shut your traps,” Bucky snapped. “You don’t have to be friends, okay? That’s not what I’m asking. I’m asking you to be coworkers. I’m asking you each to officially do what you’re good at. Tony, you’re good at understanding legalities and managing large groups of people in boardrooms and during press conferences. Steve, you’re good at managing people in the field of battle and and working as a strategist. So those are your official job assignments from now on. The rest of the team will still speak up when they want to or feel the need to, but you two have the final say in those particular areas because no one on this team can negotiate a deal like Tony, and no one is as strong a leader as Steve.”

Bucky gave the both of them hard stares. Steve was the one to cave first.

“Fine,” he stubbornly ground out.

Tony immediately jumped at the concession. “That means no more secret calls to the Accords Committee behind my back,” Tony demanded. “It means you stay out of it. You have no idea of how much ground I lost and how many favors I had to call in when I was arguing for them to let you and your lot back into the US and revoke your criminal status. We lost a lot of leeway and a lot of respect during that little stunt-”

With a scowl firmly in place, Steve said, “If I stop working on the Accords, then you have to at least try being a part of the team. That means attending drills and team bonding nights and-”

“Wait, drills?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, drills,” Steve said with a frown towards Tony. “We’ve only ever done practice drills sporadically, and if we’re going to properly fight in the field, drills will be a regular mandatory event for everyone on the team.”

“Tony?” Bucky asked. “What do you say? You’ll attend drills and follow Steve’s lead in battle, and Steve will follow your lead in regards to the political side of the Avengers and with the Accords.”

With an aggravated sigh, Tony said, “Fine.”
“You’re trending,” MJ informed Tony when he walked into Midtown High’s robotic lab for a Saturday of nerding out with a bunch of teenagers.

“I’m always trending,” Tony easily agreed as he made a beeline for one of the computer terminals to check out what his minions - unpaid child labor force - proteges had come up with by way of coding that month. “What am I being trendy about today? World changing technology? Rescue and relief efforts in far off lands? Is it my new haircut?”

“It’s that list of rules you have posted on the Avengers floor of the tower,” Ned chipperly informed him. “MJ got photos of the list and Peter recorded some stuff.”

“O...kay,” Tony said slowly, turning away from his computer monitor to level MJ and Peter with a narrow-eyed gaze. 

“She made me do it!” Peter fibbed as he pointed an accusing finger at MJ.

“I strongly suggested,” MJ corrected.

“You were threatening me with blackmail!”

“And you made the choice to bow under pressure.”

Tony turned back to the computer, quickly pulling up a web browser and almost instantly finding the YouTube account named AvengersInAnarchy999. The account was only five hours old and had three videos, and all three videos had already gone viral.

Clicking on the first upload, Tony watched as a large picture of the Avengers House Rules was displayed - and jeez, he hadn’t realized that it had gotten so out of control. What had started as a neatly typed and printed list had turned into a sprawling web of additions, amendments, and contradictions over the years. The whiteboard which was originally meant for “suggestions” had gone to hell ages ago - Tony blamed Thor for mixing up the dry erase marker with a permanent marker. Then, construction paper had been tacked all over the wall, some pages with multiple rules written out on them, and some with only a single very important rule written out in bold marker. Eventually, people had stopped bothering with paper at all. Scott’s daughter had written a rule directly on the wall in crayon after an incident with one of her stuffed animals during a visit. Natasha liked to carve rules which she considered particularly important into the plaster. Tony liked to include diagrams and illustrations with his additions, and Clint liked to shoot arrows into the rules he wasn’t fond of.

Out of context, it wasn’t immediately obvious what was being pictured on the video. The hodgepodge looked like a crazy person’s attempt to map the timeline of a conspiracy which wasn't real and had never occurred. Clarification was quick to come, however, as the picture zoomed in on the mess. Atop the screen, the words AVENGER HOUSE RULES appeared, and the picture stopped zooming when 9: Don’t eat Thor’s Pop-Tarts was clear and legible on the screen.

“Thor hasn’t been by in ages,” Rhodey was saying as the video began to play.

“Platypus, no,” Tony groaned.

“Dude, don’t even,” Clint warned in the video.

Grabbing one of the boxes of cinnamon Pop-Tarts from the cupboard, Rhodey said, “Thor hasn’t been by in so long, these have probably gone stale.”
“The vikings called Thor the god of fertility,” Clint pointed out. “Nothing of his ever goes stale.”

“He’s not going to miss one package,” Rhodey insisted. “Especially if I replace the box-”

“We just finished dealing with the fallout from the Accords, man,” Clint sighed. “Do you really want to start an intergalactic incident over artificially flavored toaster pastries?”

“Artificially flavored with LSD and meth,” Rhodey pointed out. “If anyone can be blamed for what is about to happen, it’s the corporation responsible for devising these amazing morsels of-”

As soon as the seal broke on the Pop-Tart’s box, a klaxon sounded and demonic chanting filled the air. The kitchen lights dimmed, the walls shuddered, and then a moment later the room returned to its normal state of being.

Or at least it was mostly normal.

Rhodey still stood in the center of the kitchen, but his complexion was ashen, his eyes were wide, and the box of Pop-Tarts was mysteriously missing from the man’s hands.

“Did I just die?” Rhodey quietly asked.

Barton stood with a sigh. “I’ll go see if Dr. Strange is around. If not, then… go lie down for a bit. It will wear off in a couple of hours,” Barton instructed as he quickly moved to search for the resident magic-user.

“I think I just spent an eternity in hell,” Rhodey told the empty kitchen.

“House Rule Nine,” Natasha said as she came into the kitchen, walked around Rhodey, and opened the fridge to grab some milk. “Don’t touch Thor’s Pop-Tarts.”

The next video started much the same way, with a full view of the House Rules before the view zoomed to focus on one in particular.

23: Coffee is life.

This video was a montage. It showed a dozen different incidents as well as the dozen House Rules and addendums which were directly related to rule 23.

“This one’s my favorite,” MJ told him as a split screen popped up.

One side showed Tony slouched on a couch in the common area and doing absolutely nothing to escape or extinguish the flames quickly engulfing the cushion beside him as he blearily said, “We’ll worry about it tomorrow.” The other half of the screen showed Wanda as she paced back and forth in front of a stairwell while speaking quickly, saying, “The alarms would sound if something was wrong - I will not use my powers to summon the elevator. I will not use my powers to summon the elevator. Bad idea. Steve! Steve! I need for you to practice good judgement for me! What do I do? How should I help? I mean, is the tower under attack or what?”

As Steve patiently explained to Wanda that the elevator was working just fine, she was at the doorway to the stairwell, and that the fully functioning elevator was down the hall, the words House Rule 33: Don’t switch the full strength with half-caff appeared at the bottom of the screen.

As the third video began, Tony blinked as the shot zoomed in on a rule which he had been unaware of until that very moment. 64: Don’t engage in prank wars with the Winter Soldier.

“I didn’t know it was Winter I was up against!” Sam sulked from where he had his head in the
kitchen sink. Steve was helping him wash something off his head while Vision wrote the new rule onto a napkin and then tacked it onto the wall with the other house rules.

“Did you honestly think it was Tony messing with your wings?” Steve asked with a sigh. “You know he doesn’t mess with our mission gear when he pranks us.”

“After that little heart-to-heart we had last month, I thought he may have upped the ante and gotten more demonstrative in his anger towards us.”

“Tony doesn’t mess with our mission gear,” Steve said again. “He wouldn’t do that no matter how angry he was. Tony doesn’t do anything which would endanger us during a fight.”

“But Winter would,” Sam muttered.

“Winter is very protective of Tony,” Vision pointed out. “While you may have been attempting to engage in playful comradery with Tony, and Tony would have understood the prank as such, Winter probably saw the trap laid out for Tony and interpreted it as an attempt to scare, hurt, or humiliate him.”

“And Tony is Winter’s favorite,” Sam groused. “Yeah, I think we’ve figured that out.”

“Figured what out?” Bucky asked as he wandered into the kitchen. “How to get that red goop off of you?”

“Wait, you knew about this?” Steve asked, turning from the sink so that the camera could see his red-stained hands.

“Was my idea.” Barnes replied with a shit-eating grin.

“Vision, add another rule,” Sam said from the sink. “The Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes aren’t allowed to do team-ups.”

Vision was writing on a napkin again, but he said, “If we started making rules against Winter and Bucky teaming up, we’d have to make rules against other people teaming up, as well. It would make team practice and game nights considerably less entertaining.”

Soon, a napkin which read 65: Do not engage in prank wars with Bucky Barnes was tacked to the wall. Then 66: Don’t f*** with Tony Stark and give the Winter Soldier or Bucky Barnes any reason to disregard rules 64 or 65.

“That last one wasn’t actually all that funny,” Tony pointed out after the video had ended.

“MJ said we had to post it for the good of mankind,” Peter said.

“The good of mankind?” Tony incredulously repeated. “Are Winter and Bucky’s prank skills that much of a threat?”

“It’s not just their mad pranking skills, idiot,” MJ said with a roll of her eyes. “It’s the massive crush they have on you and fair warning to villains everywhere that if they mess with you, they’ll have a devious Super Sniper/Assassin combo to deal with.”

Tony almost did a spit take regardless of the fact that he wasn’t drinking anything.

“They do not-”

Before Tony could even get the words out, MJ reached around him, took control of the cursor, and
scrolled down to some of the comments under the video.

“Just because it’s popular opinion doesn’t mean it’s a fact,” Tony weakly informed the teenagers after reading some of the very supportive comments which were posted beneath the final video.

Barnes usually only spent time in the penthouse if he woke up in the Winter Soldier’s bed. Tony was therefore surprised when one evening, it was Bucky who stepped off the elevator, slouched into the living area, and collapsed onto one of the couches, rather than Winter.

“What’s up, Sargent?” Tony asked as he looked up from the specs he was reviewing for R&D.

“Steve and I had a fight,” Bucky informed him.

At least, Tony thought that was what the man said. It could have been, “My lego fort is fallen,” or, “My appendix has ruptured.” It was hard to tell when Bucky was lying face-down and had his face pressed into the couch cushions.

Just to make sure, Tony asked, “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Bucky chuckled as he sat up. “It didn’t come to blows. There was just a lot of yelling.”

Not the appendix one, then.

“What were you fighting about?” Tony asked. Winter, probably, Tony thought. Because that was what Bucky and Steve argued about the most.

“The same thing we always fight about,” Bucky informed him. “You.”

“Excuse me?” Tony asked, his eyes wide.

With a tired sigh, Bucky’s head fell back on the couch as he explained, “He seems to think that since you and I get along these days, it means that you and he should get along as well.”

“We get along fine,” Tony announced, which he was proud to say was true. Since they’d started doing team drills regularly, their battles had become much smoother. Steve has learned not to throw his shield anywhere near Tony, and the rest of the team had gotten used to Tony not always being around to catch them when they fell (Wilson had taken over acting as the team’s transport during battles). The team dynamics were getting better off the field, too. Tony no longer had to find excuses to Get the Hell Out of There whenever Steve was within his immediate vicinity for longer than ten minutes, and Tony no longer felt like bashing his head against the wall whenever he spoke with the other Avengers about the Accords. It turned out that setting and maintaining boundaries was the thing to do when a bunch of superheroes with sensitive dispositions lived and worked together.

“Sure,” Bucky agreed. “But Steve wants things to be the way they used to be.”

“Not gonna happen,” Tony instantly declared.

“I know,” Bucky said. “Thus, the argument. It’s like… He got me back, and now he thinks that if he applies the same principles and methods to get you back, everything will be fine and dandy again.”
“Except that if he employed the principles and methods he used to rescue you to me, the team would probably be left dealing with a second personality who isn’t nearly as happy-go-lucky and fanciful-free as Winter,” Tony intoned.

“I don’t know,” Bucky said as he gave Tony a shit eating grin. “If you ended up in the same predicament as me, I think you might be the evil half of that equation.”

“Winter’s not evil,” Tony replied, the words a knee-jerk reaction after spending months defending the man’s very right to exist.

“That fucker likes green skittles,” Bucky argued. “If that isn’t an indication that he’s the Antichrist, I don’t know what is.”

“What’s wrong with green skittles?” Tony asked, honestly offended. “They should have stopped after making the green skittles. But no, they had to go and ruin a good thing by making every bag a rainbow monstrosity, and it’s things like this that are the reason it took me such a long time to figure out that you weren’t the second worst person in the world, Barnes. Why would you even suggest-”

Bucky was still grinning at him, and Tony realized that the ass was trolling him.

Rolling his eyes, Tony reminded Bucky of the issue at hand. “The green Skittles are the best Skittles. End of story, stop distracting me. I still don’t understand why you’re arguing with Steve about me. Just because I’m not getting along with one of the other kids on the playground doesn’t mean you need to step in all the time. I can look after myself.”

“You shouldn’t always have to, though,” the man hummed in response. “And Steve needs to come to terms with the fact that he’s never going to have a buddy-buddy relationship with you again. I’ve been heading him off from cornering you for a talk for weeks.”

“And today was different from those other times because…?”

Bucky grimaced. “I’ve been getting a little frustrated with having the same conversation over and over again, and I may have let my frustration get to me, and I may have told Steve that he wasn’t any better than Obadiah Stane.”

Tony’s eyebrows slowly rose as he processed this information. “You told him what?”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Bucky defensively declared. “I was just trying to make him understand why you wouldn’t be friends with him again and why he should leave you alone, but then I may have pointed out what you did to the last person who betrayed you and took a kill shot at your arc reactor. Now he’s not speaking to me, and he hasn’t stopped wailing on the bags in the gym all afternoon.”

Tony wanted to point out that the Steve-Acting-Like-Stane analogy wasn’t exactly inaccurate, and he wanted to thank Bucky for sticking up for him and having his back, but it seemed like these would be inappropriate responses considering how upset Bucky was about the whole thing.

Tony remembered the times he’d called Rhodey to complain about Pepper, when they were still together. He’d made the calls because he needed to vent, but at the same time he didn’t feel like Rhodey knew Pepper the same way Tony did. He appreciated it when Rhodey made sympathetic noises about whatever situation Tony was complaining about, but if Rhodey ever said anything nasty about Pepper, Tony became very defensive of her very quickly, and suddenly he would be upset at Pepper and Rhodey both.
This is why Tony surrounded himself with AIs.

“I’ll talk to Steve,” Tony decided with a harried sigh.

Bucky frowned. “You don’t need to-”

“Yes I do. You shouldn’t be fighting these battles for me, and I’m not going to let you damage your relationship with your BFF just because I’d rather run from this particular problem than face it. I’m getting this over with.”

“Bucky was right, you know,” Tony told Steve after they had finished yelling at each other and had gotten all of the really nasty bits out of their systems. “I’m not going to be friends with you, and I’m not going to trust you. Been there, done that, and all it got me was a knife to the back, your shield to my arc reactor, millions of dollars in property damage and reparations, and over a year of muddling through the Accords by myself.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Tony,” Steve tried, looking exhausted.

“Is that supposed to make it better?” Tony asked. “Congratulations, Steve. You did worse by me than most of the people who actively try to kill me and destroy my life. You don’t honestly expect me to allow you into a position where you can do that to me again, do you?”

Steve’s shoulders sagged as he finally, finally gave in. “No, I don’t,” he quietly conceded.

“Good. Then stop being an ass to Bucky, stop harassing me, and focus on making sure that we can at least work together on the field.”

Tony wasn’t sure how to approach the subject with Winter, since it was one of the few topics they’d never actually discussed.

Therefore, Tony brought the issue up with all of the tact and grace which he used when approaching any unfamiliar situation.

He tossed the tablet which he was working on towards the soldier, and when the man caught it and glanced at the schematics open on the screen, Tony declared, “Done!”

Winter studied the blueprints with a raised eyebrow, then asked, “Why?”

“Sergeant Barnes doesn’t like the star. Our born and bred American boy finds it offensive, and he wants to wear an American made product. He asked me if I could look into a new design. You’re the one who remembers the shit Hydra did with the arm, though, so I thought this was one body modification that shouldn’t be done without full consent and approval from all parties involved. Waking up with a tramp stamp is one thing - it happens to the best of us. Waking up with a new arm is something else entirely. And I mean, those Hydra scientists did something right with you, in that they gave you a well designed and well built appendage, but the new design has a few new
bells and whistles and a very much improved power cell—"

Squinting at the screen, Winter asked, “Is that a switchblade in the wrist?”

“It’s detachable and everything,” Tony confirmed.

“When?” the soldier asked, his brow furrowed. “I keep half a dozen knives on me at all times, and this design is also equipped with a - is that a repulsor? It has repulsor technology, flashbangs, a taser, and three tranq darts stashed inside of it. Why the fuck is there a switchblade in the wrist?”

“I don’t know. I thought it would look cool?” Tony said with a shrug.

Tony was surprised when Winter responded by dropping the tablet, launching himself over the coffee table, and attacking Tony. With his mouth.

Winter was very thorough and very efficient when it came to kissing. Tony was well aware that the soldier was capable of multitasking, but Tony had never considered the epicness which might occur when that ability was applied to kissing. There were lips, teeth, and tongue all over the place, all at once, Winter wasn’t shy about using his metal hand to grip Tony’s hip tight enough to leave a bruise, and he didn’t hesitate in taking full advantage of Tony’s overwhelmed state to make Tony’s body do exactly what he wanted it to do.

“Damnit!” Rhodey cried, making Tony jerk in surprise. Because yeah, a kiss that had lasted maybe thirty seconds had made him forget that the rest of the world existed, and that Rhodey had only left the living area to make a new bag of popcorn. “Winter, we’ve talked about this! It’s fine and even somewhat understandable that you’re completely obsessed with my best friend, but I don’t want to see it or hear about it or—"

“Fuck you, Rhodes,” Winter responded as he sat up - when did Tony wind up on his back, and how did they get to the floor? “Tony just designed a new arm for me, and he put an extraneous weapon in it just for the hell of it, and he is going to be rewarded for his behavior, your sensitive constitution be damned—"

“I’m not sensitive!” Rhodey argued. “It’s bad enough hearing you talk about all of the depraved sexual acts you intend to perform on the guy who’s like a brother to me. It’s something else entirely to have to watch you engage in those acts in public spaces where I hang out and watch tv and sometimes take naps. And we’re in the middle of a movie, dude! I’ve been trying to sit through the entirety of Transformers for almost a decade, and-—"

As Winter and Rhodey continued to loudly argue, Tony sat up and rubbed at his lips, which were honest-to-Oden tingling, and then he rubbed at his back, which hurt - he must have hit the floor hard, and it was a testament to Winter’s ability that Tony hadn’t noticed.

“What just happened?” Tony wondered. “I think I may have had a religious experience.”

“It certainly seemed so,” Dr. Strange said from his place lounging in a nearby recliner.

“Um, shouldn’t we talk about this?” Tony asked as he watched Winter carefully remove the butterfly displays from the wall of his room.
“We have talked about it,” Winter responded.

Blinking, Tony asked, “When was this? I don’t remember having any *let’s move in together after sharing one mind blowing kiss conversation.*”

Tony almost immediately regretted this statement when he saw the self-satisfied smirk stretching across Winter’s lips.

“I probably should have been more clear,” Winter told him. “Barnes and I have talked about it. We have decided that while you’re an attractive, kind, brilliant man, you’re slow on the uptake when it comes to understanding people and making decisions about your personal relationship with them. Therefore, we’re in charge. Technically, right now, I’m in charge. And I say that no, we are not moving too fast and we don’t need to discuss this. I say that I should have moved into your room weeks ago.”

“Hey, I’ve been doing great in the personal relationships department for the last few months!” Tony pointed out.

“Only because I’ve been scaring people away from you and Barnes has been mediating your conversations with the others. And I hate to admit it, but Barnes is right - it’s somewhat concerning that you’ve been so twisted up and screwed over by people that you’re more willing to interact with and support someone like me than to get to know and work with someone like Barnes.”

Tony was very confused about what was happening. Bucky and Winter had been talking behind his back, clearly. But…

“You two hate each other,” Tony pointed out, because that was the one thing he knew for sure. Even though they’d started communicating, Winter and Bucky hated each other. They hated each other, and that would probably never change because there weren’t exactly any trust fall exercises the two men could do to build camaraderie of any kind.

“Sure,” Winter instantly agreed. “But we don’t hate you. And you don’t hate us. So we… we are going to share you.”

The way Winter said the word *share*, it sounded like a profanity.

“Oh, well if you and Bucky have agreed, then okay,” Tony dryly stated.

Winter rolled his eyes. “Don’t give me that attitude. You and I both know that you can stand up for yourself when you really need or want to. If any aspect of what is happening right now was upsetting to you, you wouldn’t be standing here talking to me, and you certainly wouldn’t be passively watching me take apart my room so that I could move all my stuff. If you want to play injured and ignored, pull that shit with Barnes, not me. Now make yourself useful. Start carrying this stuff to your room. The sooner we’re done here, the sooner we can go back to inappropriately making out in public places and offending our friends and coworkers.”

It figured that Winter would instantly find a means of controlling him via a system of positive reinforcement. No one else had ever realized how powerful an incentive making out was for him. As it was, Tony trusted that Bucky wouldn’t let Winter use that knowledge to take advantage of him *too* often.
Tony awoke to a slap in the face.

It took him a moment to realize that he wasn’t being slapped, but rather smacked. Beside him, Bucky was flailing about as he sat up, his head whipping from side to side and his eyes wide as he asked, “Where the fuck am I?”

“You are currently on the top floor of Stark Tower in the year 2016-” FRIDAY began to recite, and Bucky immediately relaxed.

“Yeah, so Winter decided to move into my room last night and then we made out for a while,” Tony announced as he rubbed at the spot where Bucky’s flailing hand had connected with the side of his head.

Bucky jumped at the sound of Tony’s voice, but then his eyes seemed to register Tony, and the bed, and Tony’s - now Tony and Winter’s - bedroom.

“You’re letting him keep the stupid butterflies?” Bucky asked, his expression going sour. “You’re letting him display them in your bedroom?”

“Winter said that if I get to keep my Iron Man merch on the walls, then he gets to keep his butterflies on the walls, too,” Tony explained.

“If that’s the deal, then I get to put up the paintings that Steve’s made for me.”

“Can’t argue with that; I may not like the guy, but his art is literally a work of art and - wait, what? You mean you’re going to put them up in here?”

“Of course I’m going to put them here. I’m moving in, too.”

With a groan, Tony flopped back onto the mattress. “You were supposed to be the reasonable one, Barnes. You were supposed to be the one who wanted to talk things out and do things the boring normal way.”

“And dance around with dates and wooing while Winter get’s to live with you and make out with you? Don’t get me wrong, you and I are still doing all of that, and there will be plenty of conversations and other normal boring things-”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Tony huffed.

“- but we’ll be doing all of it while living together. I’ll be damned if Winter’s the only one who gets to smooch on you.”

“I wouldn’t call it smooching,” Tony told him. “Smooshing implies a level of gentleness and innocence which is distinctly lacking from Winter’s technique-”

“Then I’ll be the one smooching,” Bucky said with determination.

And smooch he did.

The kiss was simple and brief, hardly more than a quick press of lips. When Bucky pulled away, he was making a face at Tony’s morning breath, but he didn’t move very far away and his eyes were smiling even while his nose was scrunched up in distaste.

The entire thing was so fucking sweet it made Tony’s gums ache, but he was smiling as Bucky said, “Go brush your teeth and get dressed. You’re helping me move today.”
“You move quick,” Scott noted as they watched Steve and Bucky argue over which items would be remaining in Steve’s rooms and which would be accompanying Bucky for his move-in with Tony. Most of the argument seemed to be about clothing. And not nice clothing, either, but worn out shirts and baggy sweatpants. When Tony had offered to buy Bucky some new laze-about-the-penthouse-clothes, Bucky had whined about how long it would take to properly wear the clothes in until they were of optimal worn comfortableness.

“I didn’t move at all,” Tony pointed out. “Winter set the moving trend, and Bucky's simply following his lead.”

“You owe me fifty bucks,” Clint told Natasha, and the woman sighed.

His eyebrows jolting upwards, Sam asked, “You bet against Tony getting together with Winter and Barnes?”

“This particular wager precedes Bucky and Winter by several years,” Clint gleefully corrected as he watched Natasha count out bills. “When the Avengers were first being formed and we were reviewing the potential member files, Nat and I spent quite a bit of time parsing through tabloid articles and reports of Tony’s Sexcapades, and we made a game of trying to figure out which reports were real and which ones weren't.”

“That’s one way of getting to know your teammates, I guess,” Tony dryly commented.

“Like you haven’t spent hours looking over our mission reports from SHIELD while trying to figure out which ones were truthful and which ones were more FUBAR than they appeared on paper,” Natasha countered.

And, point.

“Natasha thought that most of the reports were exaggerated, strait up fabrications, or that you'd outgrown your seemingly adventurous attitude in bed and that you’d gone vanilla,” Clint informed him.

“No one has ever called me vanilla about anything in my life,” Tony incredulously stated as he looked over to Natasha.

“I think we've all known for a very, very long time that my initial assessment of you was way off the mark. And in my defense, you stopped sleeping around after you received the arc reactor, and I always suspected that your time being held captive had left you with so many triggers that trying for anything beyond vanilla was a no go,” Natasha told him.

“Hey, do all of you sit around and speculate about my sex life like this?” Sam asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

Ignoring Sam, Clint accepted Natasha’s money with a grin as he announced, “I said that you were so wild and adventurous that you would somehow manage to do something in sex or a relationship which had never been done before. Considering the fact that Bucky and Winter are something that’s never been done before, and now you’re in a relationship with them…”

“I bet the sex is still vanilla,” Natasha muttered.
“It’s not! I mean, it won’t be, when sex actually starts happening!” Tony insisted.

“Either way, I win on the technicality,” Clint gloated.

“Can we stop talking about this?” Scott sighed. “I don’t want to sit through any more presentations about Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, please.”

“Don’t those rules only apply when we’re out in the field?” Sam asked. “Asking us not to talk about sex in the place where we live and spend all of our downtime seems a little extreme.”

As the debate devolved into something which Tony knew was going to result in their team sitting through a boring seminar of some kind, Tony decided that it was fine if his teammates were under the impression that his sex life was vanilla. The first time anyone mentioned as much around Winter, he would correct them with impunity.

“So you’re… dating both of them,” Pepper slowly confirmed.

“I guess so? I’m definitely dating Barnes. He’s been very considerate in letting me know when we’re hanging out together and when we’re technically on a date. Winter isn’t nearly as concise - I think he likes to keep me on my toes and guessing. But regardless of our relationship status, we’re definitely living together.”

The tilt of Pepper’s mouth and eyebrows indicated she was in disbelief, but in true Pepper form, she only continued to patiently nod as she asked, “And how is cohabitation working out for you?”

“Better than I thought it would,” Tony honestly replied. “It helps that Winter and Bucky can never be in the same room at the same time. I don’t think they would be capable of sharing any sort of space if I wasn’t there to talk them down from expressing their opinions on the other’s taste in decor via vandalization. The best part of it, I think, is that since Winter’s rooming with me now, we’ve been able to convert his old room into a library so we won’t have to put any more bookcases up in the living room.”

“Of course,” Pepper agreed. “Because the most complicated part of dating two men sharing one body is rearranging your living room so that you don’t have to be assaulted by the view of something non-electrical occupying space in your home.”

“Exactly,” Tony confirmed.

Pepper gave a long sigh, and her eyes darkened until she was giving him the No More Games face. Pepper’s No More Games face was twice as horrible as Steve’s Game Face.

Usually, Tony cowered before that gaze. Today, it caused Tony to feel like something was finally right.

Tony and Pepper’s break-up had been nasty, and they had faked their friendly attitudes towards one another for a long time afterwards. After months of seeing each other in boardrooms and greeting each other with pointedly polite smiles or tentative nods, they began to forgive each other and move on. Now, when Pepper leveled him with that look, Tony felt like he finally had his friend back.
“They’re treating you well?” Pepper seriously asked.

“Yes,” he was confidently able to tell her.

Tony was 75% correct when he announced to the team that his sex life with Winter and Bucky wouldn’t be vanilla.

Winter was a kinky fucker. He was controlling, and possessive, and sometimes a little dangerous. His idea of going slow involved the use of intricate knots when tying Tony up and experimentation with orgasm denial. He didn’t so much cuddle after sex as he allowed Tony to collapse on top of him in a boneless, tired heap. And Winter was shameless when it came to public displays of affection. His leer was a thing of magnificence, and it never failed to make Tony’s knees go weak (Rhodey liked to claim that Tony was swooning).

Bucky, on the other hand, was very thoughtful during sex. His every move and action seemed purposeful and deliberate, and Tony gagged a bit the first time he thought of it as love making. When Bucky kissed Tony in front of others, they were the kind of kisses which made people go Awww. Which wasn’t to say he couldn’t get a little dirty - Bucky was a bit of an exhibitionist - he liked having sex in semi-public places, and most of their dates outside of the tower ended with the two of them going at it in a restaurant’s bathroom or in Tony’s car.

It only ever got awkward when one of the men would wake up ready for sex only to find that the other had already thoroughly worn Tony out. Tony refused to help mediate the argument which ensued where Bucky and Winter tried to work out some sort of schedule for sex with Tony (Tony soon discovered that either way the argument went, he was the winner of all the things).

He should have known better than to let the two men work it out for themselves.

“T-G-I-S,” Tony said by way of greeting the day.

“It’s Wednesday,” Winter grunted in response.

Flopping onto his back, Tony blearily rubbed at his eyes as he glanced at Winter sitting beside him in bed, the man's back propped against the headboard as he read a collection of short stories by the Grimm brothers.

Tony turned, flopping over to lie across Winter’s legs before pulling the blankets tight around his shoulders. He fully intended to fall back to sleep as he told the soldier, “Callenders, months of the year, days of the week, and the 24 hours of the day are artificial constructs created by humans in order to add some form of structure to their chaotic lives. They are sloppy and inefficient artificial constructs, and I just completed a magnificent workshop bender, and it’s Saturday if I damn well say it’s Saturday. It’s the spirit of the thing that counts, so T-G-I-S.”

To drive home his point, Tony forcefully snuggled against Winter’s legs and abdomen. Snuggling only happened with Winter on the weekends when the rare lazy day occurred. Winter was ambivalent about snuggling at the best of times, but he was especially tolerant of Tony’s attempts when he was reading in bed - Tony’s head and shoulders made a fine perch for the man’s books.

Letting out a long sigh, Tony closed his eyes, preparing for another few hours of sleep when
Winter surprised him by saying, “FRIDAY? Inform Ms. Potts that Tony is celebrating the weekend, and he won’t be into the office until the next time the artificial construct known as Monday rolls around.”

Tony groaned. “The artificial construct of time argument doesn’t work on Pepper, Winter. She says that if I get to construct artificial intelligence, then I have to adhere to other people’s artificial constructions as well and - Wait. Did you just call in my vacation days? Winter, vacation days are \textit{not} an artificial construct. Vacation days are a mathematical formula. They involve money, and increments of non-artificial time in which I don’t have to show up at the office, and I was going to use those days to take you on some Indiana Jones style tomb raiding adventures. Please tell me you are \textit{not} forsaking the chance to explore jungles, rob graves, and tussle with cannibalistic voodoo cults so that we can laze around in bed and read Germanic fairy tales.”

“Today’s my birthday,” Winter replied.

At this, Tony became as close to fully awake and alert as he could be before his first cup of coffee. “What?” he asked as he sat up. “I mean… Bucky’s birthday is in March…”

“You think I’m sharing a day with that asshole? Fuck that,” Winter scoffed.

“And today is your birthday because…?”

“Because I decided it was,” Winter replied.

“Ah. Of course,” Tony agreed. “Well… The adventure vacation was supposed to be for our one year anniversary - I was going to get you the hat and the whip and everything.”

Winter’s eyebrows rose. “Would I get to use the whip on you?”

“You can’t ask me things like that, Winter. I’m getting old, and I have a heart condition. The autopsy report will read \textit{death by anticipation}. But yeah. I can rush order the hat and the whip - let me just arrange for the plane tickets and…”

Before Tony could reach his phone, he found himself on his back being straddled by a half naked Winter Soldier.

“Save it for the anniversary,” the man commanded. “Today is \textit{my} birthday, and I get to decide how we celebrate.”

Tony’s breath hitched as the man slowly and purposefully ran the tips of his fingers down Tony’s arms, then grabbed his wrists and pinned them above his head.

Leaning close, Winter warned him, “It’s my birthday, and no one’s going to notice you missing for five days.”

“Oh,” Tony breathed.

Tony wasn’t usually one for taking things slow, especially when it came to something he wanted. An orgasm, for example. He was very impatient when it came to climaxing during sex.

Winter countered his impatience with several lines of rope and a cock ring.
Winter had been preparing to celebrate his birthday for some time, apparently. He spent the morning getting Tony worked up, touching him carefully and patiently, his expression detached and his eyes observant as Tony got closer and closer to the edge only for Winter to pull away and add yet another restraint. It was all very calculated, and Tony was soon cursing as he realized that Winter was purposefully winding him up and holding off for his own amusement.

“Come on,” Tony panted as Winter pressed several well-slicked fingers in and out of Tony, his movements slow and methodical as he idly watched Tony writhe against the ropes restraining him. His arms were secured above his head, and his legs were held up and apart, secured to his chest and leaving him spread and fully displayed for Winter. “I’m ready,” he insisted as Winter idly caught a bit of lube dripping from Tony’s ass before pushing it back inside of him. “Get inside of me and fuck me. I’m ready.”

In response, Winter hummed. “You may be ready, but I’m not,” he informed Tony with a pleased leer.

Tony groaned in annoyance as Winter withdrew, turning towards the entire fucking chest of toys he’d set next to the bed. Tony’s groan turned into a sob as Winter returned and pressed a plug into him.

Grinning, Winter told him, “I think I’m ready for a bit of a break. Tell me if you’re about to strain anything. It would be a pity if you were taken out of the game before we could properly start playing.”

“Come on,” Tony snarled as Winter grabbed his book from the bedside table and settled against the headboard beside his bound form.

“Be patient,” Winter hummed in reply.

Tony was impatient, but Winter’s special form of torture was worth it, he though.

It took Winter a while to get properly worked up, so it was rare for Tony to see him in full form. It was a treat, reserved for special occasions when time was put aside and Winter was able to work without distraction or interruption.

Winter’s eyes were dark, his pupils blown wide, and he was looking at Tony like he was prey, and like he was going to be devoured. Tony was gone by then. He’d lost track of the hours, and the toys, and the games, and he was little more than a blubering, sloppy mess of nerves and sensation.

“Please,” he quietly begged, his voice gravely and hoarse, only a little louder than a whimper. “Winter, please.”

The man responded with a pleased, satisfied hum as he spent another few moments admiring Tony’s bound form. Then, Winter slowly and carefully tugged at a few knots, causing the ropes to go slack and fall away from Tony, letting his body unfurl and go limp. He groaned as his bruised, aching limbs were released, but Tony lacked the energy and presence of mind to stretch or move.

“That’s it,” Winter breathed as he effortlessly rearranged Tony’s limbs to his satisfaction, Tony unresistant and limp as he was repositioned. “That’s right, Tony. Don’t move, don’t think, and
don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything.”

Tony let out a long, low sound when Winter finally removed the plug, and then finally, finally, the man was inside of him and pounding into hims with long, hard thrusts.

It wasn’t long until Tony’s every breath was a sob. He was all feeling and sensation, Winter had kept him that way for hours. “Please,” he begged. “Please.”

“Good,” Winter breathed and then he finally, finally, released Tony’s cock from the ring.

“What a fucking mess.”

Tony’s eyes slid open, but his body wasn’t able to do much else. As he took inventory of himself, he instantly knew that Winter’s treatment would leave him out of commission for at least two more days.

“Buck?” he managed to breath.

“Relax, Tony. FRIDAY’s starting a bath, and the food will be here by the time we’ve finished up.”

It took every spare bit of Tony’s concentration and energy to roll to his side. Through slatted eyelids, he saw Bucky grimacing as he neatly rewound and put away Winter's rope, then began gathering the various toys which Winter had employed and discarded during their time together.

“Isn’t there a rule?” Tony asked. “A Winter-Bucky Bedroom Rule about cleaning up your own messes or something?”

“Sure,” Bucky replied. “But Winter’s decided on his birthday, yeah?”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, because while the entire thing had been amazing, Winter’s arbitrary method of choosing a date for his birthday seemed a little hanky.

“I’m in charge of clean-up and aftercare when Winter’s celebrating his birthday,” Bucky informed him. “We agreed that it’s the one time a year when I don’t get a say over what he does, where, or for how long, and I give him the gift of my discomfort and confusion while picking up… all of this. Seriously, why is the waffle maker here? What the fuck did he do with the waffle maker?”

“He made waffles,” Tony replied with an laconic grin. “And then he ate them off of me. Even super soldiers need to refuel every once in a while.”

Bucky sighed, but he dutifully set the waffle maker aside for cleaning. He very pointedly kept it separate from the other items he was collecting.

“Alright, come on old man,” Bucky urged after FRIDAY notified them that the bath had finished filling. He moved onto the bed, carefully pulling the sheets away from Tony and lifting him from the bed in order to carry him to the bathroom.

Bucky paid for the "old man" comment when his knee landed firmly in a large spot of syrup and lube which had smeared together on the bed sheets during Winter’s time with Tony. The sound of disgust he made as he realized what had happened would doubtlessly become Winter’s ringtone in the near future.
It was several hours, a long bath, and a deep tissue massage from Bucky before Tony felt somewhat human again. Bucky was kind enough to change the sheets on the bed before returning Tony to the mattress, and then Bucky served him dinner.

Tony was checking his email and texts - holy crap, was it actually Saturday now? Already?

He was about to lift a bite of perfectly cooked steak to his mouth when he realized that Bucky wasn’t reading next to him, like Tony thought, but was instead closely watching him instead.

“What?” Tony asked.

“I’m just thinking of how I’m going to top Winter’s performance when it’s time for my birthday,” he revealed.

At this, Tony gave a loud, dramatic groan. “Please,” he said, “please do not talk to me about sex for at least a week. Even then, I don’t think I’ll be up for more than a quickie hand job, Buck. Winter did not go easy on me.”

“It’s a good thing that you’ll have six months to recover before it’s my turn, then,” Bucky reminded him with a cheeky grin.

Blinking, Tony opened the calendar on his phone and realized that yes, Winter had very conveniently chosen a birthday for himself which was smack dab on the other side of the year from Bucky’s.

“You two are planning to kill me,” Tony realized.

“Slowly,” Bucky agreed. “Very, very slowly, over an extended period of time. Just wait until you realize what we’ve got planned for your birthday.”

When Tony’s response was to stare at Bucky with wide eyes and his mouth hanging open, Bucky treated him to a gentle, fond smile as he took Tony's hand and pushed at it until the forkful of food Tony held was guided into his mouth.

“Eat,” Bucky commanded. “You’ll want to keep your strength up.”

“I may or may not have a concussion,” Tony reported as the battle came to a close. “It’s hard to tell through the adrenaline.”

“Wanda, Scott, can you two start moving debris?” Steve called. “Everett says they evacuated the building, but they’re not sure everyone got out. Tony?”

“The suit’s picking up on several life forms - it looks like they made it into a shelter in the basement. Thank you, New York City building code, for making bunkers mandatory in populous areas of the city. Best public safety project ever.” Tony gleefully reported as he finished scanning the destruction and flew down to meet with the rest of the Avengers.
“Stark, they want you to take a look at the weapons used in today’s attack,” the man immediately began.

“Those may have been weapons, but those were not Earth weapons,” Tony immediately argued. “You might want to call Spider-Guy, actually. He has way more experience with this salvaged knock-off bullshit than we do.”

“Regardless,” Ross began to press, his eyes narrowed.

“Have Strange and Vision take a look at the weapons,” Bucky commanded as he came up beside Tony. “Babe, you okay? Are you sure you don’t have a concussion?”

“Looking good, Boss,” FRIDAY said as she finished preforming her own scans on Tony.

“If the weapons were salvaged, like you say,” Ross continued, “then we need your help to determine from where. There are already reporters gathered at the edge of the barrier asking questions—”

Tony wasn’t paying attention to Ross, because Bucky was struggling to release the manual latches which allowed Tony’s helmet to detach from the rest of the suit. As soon as the helmet was gone, Bucky’s hand gently trailed through Tony’s hair and over his scalp, causing Tony to hiss when the other man’s fingers prodded at the nasty bump forming on his head.

“Sorry,” Bucky murmured before pressing a quick kiss to Tony’s lips in apology.

“Inappropriate,” Steve muttered.

“Fuck off, Stevie,” Bucky hummed as he moved to continue his examination. “If I want to reaffirm my man’s continued survival with a little mouth-to-mouth, that’s nobody’s business but mine.”

“There are reporters and civilians gathering,” Steve argued. “Everybody needs to remain professional.”

“And we need to move quickly, before the vultures start coming up with their own answers to their questions,” Ross pressed.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky turned to the others and said, “You know what? Tony’s hurt. And if I don’t finish checking him out, Winter might show up to get the job done more quickly and efficiently.”

“Ugh, gross,” Rhodey muttered.

Sighing, Steve squared his shoulders and decided, “Dr. Strange, Ant-Man, you two go and take a look at those weapons. Nat, see if you can get anything out of the men we captured. Wanda, Clint, Rhodey, you work on rescuing those people from the bunker. Sam, Vision, you two are on para duty today.”

Sam groaned as he looked to the line of reporters which were gathering at the barricade.

“On one condition,” Wanda put in.

Steve turned to her with a raised eyebrow, because not helping the stranded civilians wasn’t an option. Wanda, however, was looking at Tony and Bucky. “If you two get to run off and play
Nurse Bucky while the rest of us deal with this cleanup, then next time Vision or I so much as break a nail during battle, you two have to cover for us.”

“Done deal,” Tony instantly agreed.

Taking a bit of the brunt weight next time would be worth it if he and his guy got to shirk their responsibilities for a bit of role play today. Tony would make sure that the memories of this day would be so fucking amazing that after the next battle, when he was helping with clean up, or talking bureaucracy with the Accords Committee, or standing in front of the press, a genuine smile would still be stretched across his lips as he faced them down.

Chapter End Notes

So, I'm a recovering alcoholic. The first chapter of this was written while I was still drinking, the second while I was a couple weeks sober, and the third after I had a few months of sobriety under my belt. I think each chapter maybe kinda reflects the mood and state of mind I was in when I wrote it, but anywho.

I've really relied on this story for the last few months - for the cathartic outlet it gave me, and for the comments and kudos from all of you. On some days, the support and encouragement people gave me while I writing this seemed like the only good thing happening in my life. I wanted to say thank you for reading, and for making my life just a little bit brighter when things were looking grim. Things are far better now, but I don't think "better" would have happened as quickly as it did without the positive encouragement I received for this story.

Again, thank you, and I hope you enjoyed the story.

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