Gimme' Back My Shoe

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**Summary**

If Tony had been in his lab, or even the suit, then JAY'd be advising him sternly: ‘No, sir, I
do not believe chasing one’s Soulmate across a lobby counts as a positive first impression.’

His better judgment certainly would’ve advised him against tackling her to the floor.

Which, without JAY’s better judgment, he of course did.

Or, that story where the last thing Arty ever wanted was to find her Soulmate. But now here he is, and damn if he isn't persistent.

Soulmate AU.
Hello and Goddamnit

Chapter Notes

Hopping on this pre-Endgame Coping Train early, y'all! This is my emotional support blanket to cushion the fall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One more time.

If Arty stubbed her toe one. more. time. on this godforsaken day, in this godforsaken city and on this godforsaken planet, she was leaving the apartment and walking straight into traffic—a nice, quick death.

It was a promise to every entity in the universe.

At least, in any other city it might have done the trick. Considering traffic in New York moved about as fast as a line at the DMV, she had considerable doubt it would get the job done to her standards. Great.

“Stub something again?” Brit’s voice emanated from the other room, in her playful I-know-you-absolutely-did-and-am-definitely-enjoying-your-suffering-because-as-your-friend-I’m-legally-allowed-to-way.

Arty glared through the wall with all the empty hatred she could muster.

Her chosen response of ‘Screw this, and you, I’m moving back home’ was discarded quickly in favor of chucking Brit’s favorite throw pillow at the wall. It bounced harmlessly to the floor, as futile a gesture as her actual annoyance.

She heard a snort on the other end.

Taking a deep breath and balancing awkwardly on one leg to rub her sadly abused foot, Arty drew on every ounce of calm she could to remind herself that she loved Brit very much and was here to support her. She couldn’t just leave.

She’d been telling herself that for two months, of course, but it hadn’t made the adjustment any easier —her mangled feet were proof of that.

“How much longer do you need in there?” Arty called out to distract herself from the pain, working some blood into the area to lessen the bruising. “You’re the one who said you wanted to leave by 9.”

“Almost done!” The response from the master bedroom was muffled under the racket of closing drawers and shuffling paperwork. “Just lookin’ for the last of Marcos’ damned tax returns. I swear the stupid things disappear like that!” Her own taxes, she meant. Marcos was a meticulous record keeper who’d probably never lost a thing in his life, but it was easy to blame him when he was halfway around the world. “Never can be certain they didn’t walk off themselves, honestly, what with the—Aha! Found them!” There was more shuffling and the thump of a dresser before Brit continued, voice drawing nearer as she came around the corner of the living room. “That’s the last of what the letter said I needed, so I think we should be—hey. Why are you chastising me on time
when you don’t even have shoes on?”

“Golly gee, professor,” Arty drawled out in her best monotone, “do ya’ think I’ll be able to fit anything smaller than a slipper on this baby?” She raised her leg dramatically and aimed her swollen big toe in the others’ direction. “Real and true?”

Brit took a close look at the hovering appendage and frowned seriously. “I think a clown shoe’s your best bet at this point. In my expert opinion, of course.”

Arty grabbed another pillow from the couch and threw it at her, smiling. “Call your brother, then, tell him to let me borrow his.”

“Excuse you,” Brit said with all the faux-offense she could ladle into her impressive height, flipping her long red hair theatrically over her shoulder, “you know damn well he moonlights as a mime, thank you very much. Absolute sacrilege.”

Arty fell onto the couch with her best put-upon sigh. “At least his miming pays for his groceries—wouldn’t mind me a slice of that,” she mused thoughtfully. “Where does one apply to Mime’s College Anonymous? Your local basement?”

Brit shrugged, grabbing her purse and easing the papers she’d gathered into them. “Or the neighborhood barn.”

Arty hummed an acknowledgment and watched her friend’s movements with growing apprehension. And maybe a little bit of laziness. She eyed the crammed shoe rack next to the door with distaste, thinking of forcing a pair of those on. “Are you sure you want me to come? Honestly, I’ll probably just be more of a problem to get through security. Besides,” the excuses started to flow easily despite her sincere interest in tagging along, “I’ve got those numbers JT wanted me to look over, the Valley Site article could use some more editing, and—”

“I’ll make you my aunt’s s’mores cake if you come.”

Arty forced shoes on, was out the door with bag in hand, and down the stairs in a minute flat.

*

New York City wasn’t all that bad, Arty knew as they made their way on foot through the streets of the mid-morning metropolis.

It certainly stood heads and tails above some of the other places she’d lived—to say nothing of its history and culture and everything else it had going for it—it just wasn’t for her. And Arty was having an increasingly difficult time pretending it was.

They crossed the street at a jog, aiming for one of the bigger avenues.

The first month or so had been easy enough to get through. It had even bordered on genuinely enjoyable. Between the moving and the unpacking, the sightseeing and the museums and the ‘Best Donuts in the World’-s on every corner, there had been enough to do to ignore her growing sense of restlessness and a creeping sensation of error. Once the novelty of it all had worn off, and the tiny apartment was too tiny to do anything but stand, and the buildings were too ominous as they watched over everything, and she couldn’t move or relax or breathe, the thought that maybe she had rushed into this whole ‘Move Across the Country’ thing became a shadow of her every waking moment.

Back home had it’s fair share of unresolved problems waiting for her too, but it was home…and she missed it terribly.
As they were buffered and maneuvered by the surrounding crowds, air warming quickly and the sounds of the city already deafening around them, Arty shrunk tight to herself and shook off the line of thought, keeping close to her companion.

It was only temporary, she reminded herself. Brit needed her. As long as her friend needed her, Arty would endure just fine.

At least the aliens had provided a halt to an approaching downward spiral.

When the grey-skinned, snarly, ‘Definitely Not ET’ looking guys had rained down from the sky two weeks ago, hell bent on taking over, the city certainly hadn’t earned any points as a place she’d like to put down roots. But it had been a break to routine and given her a new appreciation for human compassion. Even now, as they passed stalls for relief efforts and storefronts with hand-painted ‘Donations and Volunteers Welcome’ signs in their windows, Arty was reminded of her species’ ability to bounce back from just about anything. Anything they wanted to, anyways. Things were hardly “normal”, but life went on and people had places to be and things to do.

The superheroes had been really cool, though. Not that they’d seen any.

Brit had sensed her agitation at the time and taken her to some beach down the coast for a surprise-slash-thank-you weekend. Fortuitous timing, one might say. They’d come home three days later, after the news warned residents to give it some time to settle down and for crews to clear debris from the roads, to find their apartment building intact but the one next to it half impaled by a giant, armored, purple, whale-looking thing.

It was bizarre to say the least, and the smell lingered even two weeks later, but they were from California—weird and bizarre was often the norm.

They were passing near a construction crane lifting a giant slab of warped alien metal when Arty spotted something out of the corner and eye and pulled her friend to a quick stop, eagerly pointing at the food cart across the street. “How much do you love me to make a pit stop?”

Brit followed the finger for a closer look. Ice Cream. Always.

“You know, our ancestors would have a thing or two to say about having ice cream for breakfast.”

“Let them say it,” Arty grinned, taking off toward the stand. “No one can hear ‘em where they are. ‘Sides, maybe I can use it to bribe the guards for an easy in.”

*  

“Do you think they’ve got them locked in a basement somewhere?” A man in a blue baseball hat asked to no one in particular.

“Yeah,” huffed some guy in a construction vest, leaning against a nearby railing, “the governments basement. Probably the same one they made them in.”

There was a murmur of agreement, some joking and some not, among the crowd milling nearby.

Arty and Brit leaned beneath an awning with their ice cream, doing their best to stay out of the May sun and out of the way of the people passing to and fro beneath it, listening to the conversation with casual interest. They’d left the apartment with plenty of time to spare, and one did not consume the treat of the gods in a rush; there was no harm in enjoying a few minutes before they continued to fight their way through the packed streets.
Others had the same thought, apparently.

Quite a mismatched congregation, the dozen or so people sitting and standing around them clearly came from different walks of life—a pencil skirt and a business suit here, three teenagers with their skateboards there, and even a parent or two with their young ones, easing them back into a routine—but all had endured the same event and were in the same boat of how to deal with it.

And all were trying to escape the heat, packed around the area the ice cream cart had claimed for its own.

“It’s totally obvious that guy claiming to be Captain America is a clone,” said one of the teens, as if preaching the word of the internet theory he’d stumbled upon the night before. “Not even the real Captain America could survive in ice like that.”

“Clone,” repeated one of his buddies, nodding mechanically.

“They’re probably all engineered,” said the same guy in the construction vest, conspiracy leading the way, “made in some lab by some scientists who think they know best and want to change us.”

There were clearly mixed feelings among the group, dissent being one of them.

“I for one am glad they’re here, engineered or no.” It was one of the ladies sitting on a concrete block, a garishly salmon top half hidden behind the wide-eyed toddler on her lap, feeding a spoonful of lemon sorbet to the small human. “None of us would be here if it weren’t for them. I say they can save my as—butt any day of the week.”

Another murmur of agreement.

“That’s what they want you to think.” Construction Guy, back at it again. “Get ya’ all cozy and warm and then BAM! We’re all under martial law and the governments playing with our brains in jars.”

Arty’s head was spinning with the leap in logic as she tried her best not to giggle. What an intellect.

“—probably did the aliens too, just think about it—”

Christ. She had to force another spoonful of Chocolate Fantasy into her mouth just to stop from snorting.

A groan from the crowd captured her feelings perfectly.

“I personally wouldn’t mind if that Thor guy came back,” said one of the women in a pencil skirt. “That’s an alien who can conquer my world any day, free of charge.” A garrison of agreement rose up like a wall, from ‘Mm-hmms’ to ‘That’s right’s.

Arty herself could hardly disagree as she watched the crane across the street do its work, occasionally lifting more alien debris to deposit on the bed of a parked semi. The sun glinted off the alien metal in fascinating ways, painting passing cars with a strange, rolling effect of color.

This was the conversation these days. Sort of. Alien invasion was definitely new: new to the status quo, new to humanities understanding of their place in the universe, new to simple, everyday dialogue. But ever since Tony Stark had bada-bing, bada-boomed himself into Iron Man the weird shit in the world had been getting progressively weirder. It was up to everyone at this point to decide how they wanted to adapt and roll with the punches.
Ice cream helped it all along, as far as Arty was concerned. It was hitting just the right spot. She refocused on the conversation, stealing a bite of Brit’s Raspberry Delight before the taller girl could stop her.

—clearly not hurting his wallet, I can tell you that,” said one of the men in a suit and tie, hair slicked back. “Stark’s actually making money off this mess,” he gestured about wildly, “taking charge of the clean up’s probably put a nice fat check in his pocket. Bet that’s why he did it.”

Arty felt a sliver of ice creep into her bloodstream that had nothing to do with the 10 am dessert. Similarly, she felt Brit stiffen beside her, words ready to go.

“He flew a nuke through a wormhole,” Arty spoke up, containing herself. “You think he pulled a suicide mission for a fortune he already has?”

Mr. Business snorted indignantly. “I think rich people will do anything to get richer,” he sneered haughtily, “especially if it means continuous profits for a company that took a hit after it shut down its weapons divis—”

“This coming from a guy who looks like he was born and raised on Wall Street?” chimed another voice. “If you’re trying to appeal to the lowly masses, guy, you could use a better disguise.”

He looked like was about to respond, Rolex flashing in the sunlight beneath his sleeve, when Arty joined in again. “I think he might just be upset Stark Enterprises is doing better than ever—without weapons. Why?” She raised a brow at him. “You work for the competition?”

“Hammer Tech is biting the dust, man,” said the first man in the baseball hat. “Not a hill you want to die on.”

“Our friend here is also oh-so-conveniently ignoring the fact Tony Stark isn’t even CEO anymore,” Brit commented dryly beside her. “He let Pepper Potts take the reigns so he could focus more on protecting people like you.”

“Ha! You must be some of those pathetic groupies that stand around his tower all day, fawning over him,” he barked loudly, but his face was mottled and pinched now. Iron Man was well-liked by the general populace these days, even well-loved since the whole ‘Nuclear Bomb’ thing, and going by the faces and murmurs around him, Mr. Business now seemed to be realizing he was outnumbered.

Whatever else he might’ve said was drowned out by an ear-piercing squeal coming from the closest stoplight.

A few bystanders were huddled around what appeared to be a young couple, embracing each other fiercely and barely able to stand still as they proclaimed their joy to the world through uncontrollable laughter and barely decipherable jabbering.

They couldn’t pick up any words from this distance that would tip them off to a reason for their outburst, but they didn’t need to.

It was the body language of the closer spectators that really gave it away: an elderly couple, withered and gray and hunched over by time, holding hands and exchanging looks of love and deep remembrance; a man in his middle age, looking for all the world bitter and resentful at the encounter; a small child, tugging on their parents hand as they pointed eagerly at the sight, waiting for their own time to come.

Awe, longing, resentment, nostalgia, hope.
All the medley of responses that normally accompanied a public Finding.

On this small street corner in New York City, two young people had just found their soulmates.

Arty’s gut flipped.

She looked away quickly, even as her stomach rolled and chest clenched and it was suddenly very, very hard to breathe. She squeezed her eyes shut, tight as could be, and focused on easing air back into her lungs.

One breath.

Two breaths.

Three.

It was all right, Arty reminded herself, even as the smell of leather and gas clouded her mind. Just a panic response.

A physical reaction, not an attack.

‘You’ve seen plenty of Findings before, Arty,’ she heard Johhni’s comforting voice in her head, ‘and you’ll see many more before your time is up. Just breathe.’

She worked to unclench her jaw as the skin on her back burned a fervent reminder.

Just a panic response. Not an attack.

Through the haze, Arty felt a gentle hand hook around her arm and guide her away from their place beneath the awning, toward a crosswalk as far away from the event as possible. Walking was beneficial, blood pumping through her veins beginning to soften her seized limbs as they once again aspired to their destination.

“You know,” her redheaded friend began conversationally, “what color do you think Black Widow uses? I’m thinking of going a shade or two darker, and I really like her base.” Brit dawned a pondering look even as she tapped a finger lightly along Arty’s arm, sensation methodic and reassuring, gently guiding her out of herself and into the conversation. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she made her own—do spies even trust commercial brands?”

Sometimes, Arty had to stop and thank the universe for bringing Brit into her life.

From the depths of her will she was able to summon a response, wrestling the shadows of her mind back into complacency. “Spies might be the commercial brands, for all we know,” she managed, her voice more than a little shaky, but it was a start. “I think her red would go really great with your routine, though. The shade you’ve got now kind of clashes with the outfit.”


Arty took a steadying breath, strength flowing back into her as she tossed the remains of her ice cream in the nearest trashcan. She hated wasting it, but now she couldn’t stomach the treat. It wouldn’t taste so good at the moment, anyways. “You know whose hair I’d like to take tips from? Or even whose hair I’d just like to take?”

“The god dude?”

“The god dude,” Arty agreed. “Man doesn’t look like he’s ever had a split end in his life.” They
were now on the shaded side of the street, on a straight path to their target. “Either all space gods have hair like that or he’s just a good boy who listened to his mama on proper hair maintenance.”

“Maybe it’s special space shampoo. The kind you get from sacrificing virgins and that sort of thing.”

Arty shrugged, considering it. “He should come down again, share the Old Knowledge with the rest of us.”

“I wanna’ touch his muscles,” Brit proclaimed.

“You’re married.”

“Still wanna’ touch his muscles,” she sing-songed, a groove creeping into her step. “I wonder if the Captain America clone would let me touch his muscles if I paid him.”

“For scientific purposes?” Arty smiled, feeling infinitely better.

“Of course.” Brit grinned mischievously. She was milking this line of thought for all it was worth to make Arty forget what they’d seen. “You think he wears cologne? Did they even have cologne in the 40’s?”

“Perfume’s been around since the dawn of civilization,” Arty said. “He probably wears some kind of ‘Justice and Liberty’ line. An All-American, Made in the States kind of scent.”

“Tony Stark definitely smells nice,” Brit said, playing off her friend’s admiration for the man.

“Marcos said so.”

Unable to help it, Arty giggled. “I’m sure the fuck he does. You don’t look like that and not smell like a billion bucks.”

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed, “Marcos says he smells like ecstasy and sin. And a little bit of coffee.”

She laughed out loud this time. “Might I just say, for the millionth time, how much I love your husband and his secure masculinity,” she said, wondering just how many times Marcos had been near enough to his employer to know what he smelled like. Probably just the once.

“On behalf of Marcos and his secure masculinity, I thank you.”

Brit kept up the banter until her friend was smiling more than a few seconds at a time, feeling her job complete. But as they walked toward Stark Tower for Brit’s appointment, and even as the redhead did a fantastic job of chasing away her friend’s demons with a broom, a part of Arty was still back there on the sidewalk, watching the Finding take place, and vowing that would never be her.

* * *

“Sir.”

Tony Stark ignored him.

“Sir.”

Tony ignored him harder.

“Sir, once again, might I suggest—“

“No.”
"As part of my job description, I feel it is my duty to inform you that—"

"Heard it already, JARVIS," Tony said, toweling his hair—perhaps a little too harshly—as he increased his speed to get as far from the pool room as possible.

He definitely wouldn’t be going back there for a while. Or ever.

"Sir, I really do believe it will be beneficial if you—"

"I’m sorry, is this Bring Stupid Ideas Back To Life Day? I missed the memo."

JARVIS was silent at the remark—more out of respect to allow his creator time to calm down, said creator knew, than any real taken offense.

As Tony made it to the wide stairs that opened to the upper levels, taking them two at a time in his agitation, he began his usual process of pretending nothing had happened.

Tony still wasn’t sure what had happened in the first place.

He’d woken up from a nightmare like normal, had barely been able to stomach a cup of coffee like normal, and had dreaded perused his high-priority messages like normal. Despite his totally normal morning, a thrum of disquiet had settled over his mood; it had tightened around him in a fashion so persistent he found himself almost jumpy, the likes of which he’d never experienced before. And he couldn’t do anything to shake it.

It couldn’t be the stress—he’d been stressed before. It couldn’t be the cleanup of the city, either; he’d done that before, too. It couldn’t be the press, or the approaching move-in day for the Avengers now that their individual suites were complete, or the almost dying. He’d almost died plenty of times he told himself.

JARVIS had begun to form his own theory, but it was a stupid theory so Tony ignored it. The end.

So, in an effort to get his whatever-it-was under control, Tony had the bright idea to do laps, even though he never used the pool, to cool off and work away some of the tension he’d found started living in his spine. A win-win.

Not.

The laps had gone just fine. Even seemed to be working.

It wasn’t until he’d gone full submersible, endeavoring to increase his ability to hold his breath under water, when it decided to happen.

He’d been floating weightlessly, maybe even enjoying the lack of oxygen and brief thought that ‘hey, this not-really-existing-thing-is-kinda-nice’, when his body rebelled and Tony found himself in the fight of his life just to break the surface. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t move, he had no control, he was going to die up here—wait, no, down here, alone, all alone, always alone, no one to even hear him or—

Once he’d managed to cough up most of the water he’d inhaled in his fit and was able to peel himself off the pool ledge, he couldn’t get away from the place fast enough.

Now here Tony was: back in his bedroom, definitely not cured, not even a bit treated, worse off than he was before. The only difference was a new set of clothes and a renewed ache in his chest from the arc reactor; it hadn’t taken kindly to his near-drowning experience.
He was *peeved* to say the least. What was he supposed to do now?

He had a meeting with the Mayor later in the day, otherwise he would pop off to go bug Rhodey. Or Pepper. Or even Happy. A cross-country trip for the sake of Petty Things usually did a number to lift his spirits. Running some of his ideas by Bruce was out of the question, too—the big guy was out of town for a month taking care of some “business”. He could always go play with something in the lab, that was his usual go-to, but then he’d have the problem of being alone with himself and his “problem”, the thing JARVIS said he needed to approach and actually deal with like a sensible adult—

No.

A distraction. That was what he needed.

Perfect.

“Sir—”

“Nope.”

Tony Stark left the penthouse, stairs in mind, as he set off for his distraction.

* * *

Getting past Stark Tower security hadn’t been as much of a hassle as they’d anticipated, bribes not necessary. The guards had given Arty the stink eye, looked her up and down with suspicion, and questioned why she was here if she didn’t have an appointment. ‘Moral support’ was the answer, a better one than ‘my friend’s antidote to boredom’, but all it took was Brit’s batting eyelashes and the big doe-eyes of someone who “just plain doesn’t feel safe alone in the city since the Incident” to get them to consider letting Arty through. She’d gone through their array of security measures and let them scan her bag, records, and ID—smiling sheepishly when the guards raised a brow at her full name—before they were convinced she was harmless and let them pass.

Up they’d gone, just like that. When Stark had tech that could spot a fleck of glitter in someone’s hair, never mind a weapon, Arty really was laughably harmless.

“How long’ll this take, you think?” Arty asked in her whisper-voice even though they were the only two in the elevator.


Legend had it if you spoke too loud in a building as fancy as this one, being generally un-fancy and lower class as they were, you were liable to be dragged off by the Suits for punishment.

“Last time didn’t take too long,” Brit added, “but Marcos was also here—didn’t have to jump through so many hoops. Not to mention aliens hadn’t attacked the building last time, so,” she shrugged.

Perhaps it was best to settle on a couple of hours, then. It made no difference to Arty: she had a book and some headphones to keep herself occupied. She should have listened to her gut and brought her laptop to work on that article, but she’d figured it wouldn’t be allowed past security. Oh well.

The elevator came to a stop with a light *ding*.

They edged out onto the sixth-floor lobby, and stopped.
Arty let out a low whistle.

Damn.

Even with the Incident, Stark Tower moved fast: all the superficial damage had already been repaired or replaced, debris cleared out, and everything was back in perfect working order.

Everything looked perfect, period.

The HUMAN RESOURCES—INTERNATIONAL DIVISION floor they were on (it had a whole floor) was huge and pristine.

The lobby was expansive, stretching from nearly one end of the building to the other, and took up nearly seventy percent of the available space. Aside from the direction they came from, which was lined with ten meters of floor-to-ceiling glass between every one of the six elevators, the remaining sides of the level were designed to hold the offices and break rooms for employees. Most of those were glass, too, providing a wide-open, breezy feel.

It was all very Zen with the amount of natural light suffusing the area—it reminded her a little of home.

Everywhere in the lobby were grey-upholstered couches and lounge chairs, some arranged in large semi-circles for conversation and some going solo for privacy; tables with refreshments and drinks and high-tech coffee machines; immaculately abstract sculptures and vases of bamboo; and desks loaded with free-use Stark tech. It was as hoity-toity as it was laidback, designed to impress the eye as much as it was for genuine comfort and human interaction.

‘Impressive’, Arty thought, tempted to sketch it and pondering the interior designer.

The only thing odd about Human Resources was the lack of, well, humans. Arty could see employees in a handful of offices, working on their computers or pacing as they talked on the phone, but the lobby itself was practically deserted. There were only two other individuals occupying the space, both keeping to themselves as they read magazines or took advantage of another cup of coffee.

Just as Brit was sifting through her purse trying to find the letter from hers and Marcos’ caseworker, a balding but kind-looking man stepped out from one of the far offices to call softly in their direction, adjusting his glasses as he did. “Mrs. Cardenas?”

“That’s me,” Brit confirmed as she and Arty picked their way gingerly around the furniture.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, extending a hand. “I’m Thomas Pritchard, your husbands new liaison. I’ll be taking care of your resubmission today.”

“Brittany,” the redhead insisted, shaking the hand eagerly and adjusting to the professional setting. The man nodded politely and Arty gave a small wave beside her; she was really just a tag-along. “Will we still be connecting with my husband? I brought all the paperwork you mentioned, but I’d feel better if I could clarify some of the plans with him personally.”

“Not to worry, miss, we’ll be speaking with him shortly,” Pritchard assured her with a smile. “He’s been very eager to see you as well.”

Beside her, Arty felt some of the tension drain away from her friend—she put on a good show, but Brit had been plagued with worry ever since Marcos left six months ago.
Pritchard stepped back and gestured an inviting arm toward his office, “If you’re ready then, we can get started.”

Arty reached out to cover her friend’s hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. You’re about to see your man, everything’s going to be alright, the action said. Once Brit nodded, she was so very, very ready for this, Arty gave her one more squeeze and let go. Off to business they were. But until they connected with Marcos her job was to keep Brit focused on something else, just as the redhead had done for her down there…and she had just the thing in mind.

“I’ll just make myself comfortable,” Arty called over her shoulder as she hunted for a prime seat, eager to see just how comfy these cushions were.

* * *

From his place behind the two-way glass, leaning casually against the slate pillar beside him, Tony Stark was practically glued to the floor.

He’d finally found his distraction.

It may have taken him three lounge areas, two conference rooms, a dining hall, and the mid-level observation deck to find it, but find it he had.

Absolutely riveting.

Across the HR—INTERNATIONAL DIVISION lobby, on the other side of the glass from which Tony now hid, a very spirited game of charades was taking place.

Player Number One, whom he’d tentatively dubbed Kit-Kat after he’d seen her pulling one surreptitiously from her bag, was currently the active contender: sitting cross-legged on one of the wide, gray lounge seats in the otherwise deserted lobby, she was gesturing theatrically but with precision, a look of concentration set firmly on her lovely face. Player Number Two, to whom he’d swiftly and decisively settled on Big Red (because with a height that impressive and a hair color that loud what other option could there have been), was seated in an office opposite but facing her friend, drumming her fingers on a desk as she struggled to put the clues together. Sitting on the other side of the desk, head bowed over a collection of papers, was Thomas Pritchard—good man, Thomas—absolutely none the wiser.

He said players, but really Kit-Kat was the one putting in most of the work.

It had taken three rounds of her dramatic pantomime and some of the best face-acting he’d ever seen to grasp they were playing for movie titles; as far as he could tell, there seemed to be no rules on genre or age. It was a film free-for-all. So far he’d seen Toy Story, Beetlejuice, and Rush Hour.

Tony ripped off another piece of scone and popped it in his mouth, watching Kit-Kat with rapt fascination.

They were on a new round.

The girl was still for a moment as she thought out the best way to convey the next film. Then, with an almost imperceptible grin, she leaned forward in her seat: arms hovering mid-chest and out in front of her, she tilted her head to the side with a wide-eyed, goofy smile and mimicked moving up and down every few seconds, rising and falling with every exaggerated breath.

Breath…
Ha!

*Jurassic Park.*

Put a hat on the girl and her Sam Neill impression was dead-on.

It took Big Red another set of clues before she, too, got it; Kit-Kat had to resort to imitating Lex’s frozen, shaky spoon moment and Dennis’ sassy finger-wagging before it clicked and she mouthed the correct movie with conviction. Kit-Kat nodded, throwing her a thumbs up.

Proud of his immediate catch, Tony helped himself to another bit of scone, readjusting his position on the pillar so it could dig into the knot between his shoulder blades.

The next one was too easy. Imitating rotating something in one hand, then plucking said invisible thing with the other hand to ‘blow’ it in a different direction, Big Red and Tony got it almost at the same time: *Labyrinth.*

Distracted only momentarily as Pritchard looked up to ask her something, then back down again with his answer, the redhead jumped back in the game by narrowing her eyes at her friend as if to say ‘Really? That all you got?’.

If Kit-Kat’s straightening spine and perfectly arched left brow were anything to go by, she had plenty more up her sleeve.

Game on.

Tony felt the first genuine smile of the day, maybe the week, creep onto his face.

Their friendly competition was proving an even better distraction than he could’ve hoped for. Due to the understandable time-off requests of employees to handle family matters, after the whole ‘Aliens Take New York’ thing, Stark Tower wasn’t back to full staff. It might be a while, yet. But that meant that when he’d set out for his earlier diversion to people-watch, or people-*bug* as Rhodey called it, there’d been a severe lack of, well, people. The dining hall had provided the chance to grab a box of fresh scones for later, and the fifth-floor lounge an opportunity to watch one of the interns dissect his brunch by color instead of food group, and that had been it. Not enough minions for habitual variety, not enough minions to cause drama worth investing in.

*This,* though…not only was this worth his investment, but the vibrant girl in the lobby with the increasingly playful you-dare-challenge-me-to-a-duel eyes was doing everything to continue *earning* said investment as he waited for what she’d do next.

Not that she knew that.

For which Tony felt kind of bad, and more than a little guilty.

He’d lived his entire life knowing what it was like to be watched, wanted or not. That’s why he’d added this passage and elevator system into the tower to begin with: so he could get around his own damn building in peace without fear of being mobbed or scrutinized. Now that the rest of the Avengers were going to be taking up residence here, too, it was more imperative than ever to have a means of privacy. He had the utmost faith in his own people to respect their distance, but it was nice to have, just in case. Tony felt a more secure knowing it was there.

Still…

He should probably leave. Let them have their fun while he sought out something else to pique his
interest that didn’t involve being an unobserved audience.

Tony shifted on his feet, preparing to make himself scarce.

Going back to his penthouse was the last thing he wanted to do. The thought of what awaited him up there, what might happen alone with himself, was enough to slow his retreat as pressure began to gnaw at his chest. The sensation in the pool was bleeding back to the forefront of his mind, struggling to breathe as the air around him was suddenly so very cold—

Out of the corner of his eye, not that he was looking for something that could give him reason to stay or anything, Tony saw Kit-Kat shift purposefully in her seat, looking over her shoulder and all around in a manner he’d almost describe as impishly conspiratorial.

Tony paused near his pillar, intrigued.

After she was certain there was no one in her immediate vicinity, oblivious to the elevator poised to release an occupant behind her, the girl rolled her shoulders and shook her hair, prepared. A hot second later she looked down at her chest with alarm, mimed grabbing something firmly in each hand, and arched her back, throwing her hands over each breast as she pretended to shriek with comedic terror. Wrenching her head back even further, Kit-Kat shook her whole torso, really getting into it as she pounded her chest and pinched her eyes shut with faux-mania.

Tony choked on air.

_Mrs. Doubtfire. Fuck._

Poor girl was so into it she didn’t notice the man who’d left the elevator frozen behind her, staring.

Tony doubled over, laughing hard enough he felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes. By all the gods of his new-friend-Thor’s people, she was _good._

Just what he’d needed.

He pulled himself together in time to see the myriad of expressions that exploded across the girl’s face when she realized she wasn’t alone. Kit-Kat was bright red in two seconds flat, blushing all the way to her toes, he was sure, and doing her very best to pretend what she’d just done was not, in fact, what she’d just done. Passing a hand over her face, Tony could make out a sheepish “G’morning” on her lips as she tried her best not to make eye contact with the stranger.

The man stared at her a full four beats more, probably as wracked with bewilderment as Tony was with exhilaration, wondering just where the hell this reaction from him had come from.

It felt nice, a wonderfully brief reprieve.

The stranger moved on carefully, as though he were afraid the girl might turn rabid. Once he was gone for good, disappearing into one of the many offices, she dropped the hand from her face and laughed in her friend’s direction, eyes bright with mirth and a smile—

_Oh wow._

_Wow._

Tony Stark never thought he’d see a smile that could be described as So Powerful It Convinced Genghis Khan Himself To Retire And Take Up Sweater Knitting For Hairless Kittens, but that was exactly what he was seeing.
Between the smile, the twinkling eyes, and her barely suppressed laughter, Kit-Kat was breathing so much radiance into the room the state-of-the-art design now looked like a dirt-soaked alley by comparison.

For a brief moment Tony was disappointed the two-way glass was soundproof. He’d have liked to hear her laugh.

Kit-Kat wrangled herself under control the same time Big Red, who’d thrown both hands over her mouth in desperation, managed to pull herself together; poor Thomas Pritchard had been jarred from his process to look around wildly for whatever had set his client off, both girls projecting innocence to their fullest when his eyes turned on them.

Once the man was firmly embedded back in his work, the game started all over again.

And before he knew it Tony was back in the game too, episode in the pool blessedly forgotten as he watched, mentally ticking off every movie Kit-Kat brought to life: Cliffhanger, Speed, Man In the Iron Mask, A League of Their Own, Lion King, Wrath of Khan, What About Bob. He was determined to get them all.

*  

Two hours, three scones, and one noticeably sore ass later, it was all coming to an end.

The section of granite floor on which Tony had taken up residence wasn’t in any way what he’d describe as “cozy”—he still couldn’t recall when, exactly, he’d sat to begin with—but it had been Home for at least the past hour and he was loathe to leave it. He liked his floor-spot.

But out in the lobby, a flurry of movement from the girls and his dear employee Thomas Pritchard indicated their business was finished: Kit-Kat was closing up the book she hadn’t been reading and unfolding herself from the chair, carefully minding the wires of her headphones so as not to yank them from her ears; Pritchard was reentering the office he’d vacated twenty minutes ago, smiling sympathetically; and Big Red was doing her best to wipe away the tears till streaming down her face, graciously accepting the tissue Pritchard held out.

It had been an interesting turn in the type of distraction, that.

Kit-Kat had been in the middle of acting out another film, doing her best to imitate riding a horse and pointing at every source of Stark tech and light source she could, growing hilariously frustrated when her friend just wasn’t getting it—clearly it was Electric Horseman, Tony had sighed with commiseration—when Big Red’s attention had been swept right out from under her. Pritchard had finished scanning and uploading his client’s papers and was loading up some type of video feed on his tablet when the connection went through and a man appeared on the other end. Dark haired, dimple-cheeked, and eager as anyone Tony’d ever seen from half a room away, the man was clearly Big Red’s husband. From her wedding ring to her heartfelt reaction, it was easy to figure out.

Once her time was otherwise occupied, the element of entertainment had changed; it hadn’t ended, merely morphed from a game of charades into one of Tony’s more innate pastimes of deduction. Not as light-hearted, but equally engrossing.

So deduct he had.

The papers she’d brought, her very presence on this distinct floor, and her appointment with Thomas Pritchard, specifically, all indicated thus: Big Red was the spouse of one of his overseas employees, either in North Africa or Western Asia, and she was here for the renewal process due to the change
in Stark Industries’ eastern-seaboard headquarters. Benefits, life insurance, stuff like that. Said employees face ticked a familiarity box deep in Tony’s mind, but without a closer look he couldn’t pin him down. From the exuberance with which the couple engaged, lots of happy tears and smiles and blown kisses, it was obvious they hadn’t seen each other in a while—maybe one of his personnel in the more politically charged countries? Likely.

Kit-Kat was obviously a close friend…maybe a sibling; without a closer examination of the girls’ features he couldn’t say one way or the other. Regardless of the distinction, she was clearly glad to see The Husband too. After her initial reaction Big Red had practically ripped the tablet from its docking station, shocking the hell out of poor Thomas Pritchard, to point it excitedly at the girl in the lobby. Tony deemed the playful-yet-clearly-loving exchange of middle fingers and stuck out tongues between the man on the screen and said lobby girl affectionate.

There had been a brief exchange of conversation between the two-and-a-half in the office, business to take care of, before Pritchard had excused himself to give the couple some privacy.

Bob’s your uncle, Fanny’s your aunt, and the genius had been left with nothing to do but observe. The moment between the couple was far too intimate a thing to watch; given the still-otherwise-deserted lobby, after Pritchard had bounced for greener pastures (presumably to raid the tea supply on the third floor), the only thing left to observe was the girl occupying the lounge chair.

He’d watched as Kit-Kat pulled a book from the bag at her feet—the cover a forest green, the title indecipherable from this distance—only to promptly ignore it. From the astonishing collection of bookmarks peaking out from between its pages (really, who needed two dozen bookmarks?) it was clear her snub came more from restlessness than actual disinterest. She had clearly read it before.

He’d watched as she pulled out her phone and a pair of headphones too, apparently to find her investment in music just as neutral. She’d probably only made it a third of the way through each song before tapping to the next.

He’d watched as she got up to wander over to the window, looking down and out and everywhere across the skyline she could set her sights on. The slight frown on her face and the slump in her shoulders indicated it wasn’t what she’d been hoping to see. Not scared of heights, if he had to hazard a guess, just disappointed with the view. Huh. That wasn’t the usual response.

He’d watched as she abandoned the window to pass by, ever so slowly, the refreshment table. She’d eyed the croissants and the donuts and the fresh fruit with gusto, consuming the table solely with her gaze. Then she’d moved on, back to her not-reading and not-listening. Kit-Kat had stood up once more to grab an office door for a lady juggling a stack of reports in one hand and a coffee carrier in the other, who smiled and thanked her profusely, and when she’d passed by the table on her return it was only to fill a small cup of water, glare at the security cameras in the room, and longingly pull herself away from the pastries.

‘Just grab a damned donut’, Tony had wanted to say. ‘Those are for public consumption, the fuzz aren’t hiding around the corner.’

Well. He might’ve been, but he wasn’t the fuzz. He was Iron Man.

And he’d watched as she’d bounced her foot, idly flipped pages and song choices for something, anything, to steal her far-away attention, occasionally glancing at the office and sipping her water. There was clearly something nagging at the girl, leaving her antsy and desperate to be forgotten.

‘Welcome to the Club, kid’, he’d said to himself, ‘Want a scone?’
But the question he’d never asked never got an answer, because now it was all over as they shuffled around out there.

Business was done, and it was back to the big, wide world.

Back to the big, wide world for them, back to the tight, constricting, Don’t Mind Me Just Drowning In A Pool world for him.

And Tony felt the walls closing in.

He didn’t want to go back. Not now.

It was quaint, this little window into a life that wasn’t his. The lives of ordinary people who did ordinary things and had ordinary jobs and loved other ordinary people and who never flew into wormholes to die in space cold and alone and—

Nope.

Who said it had to end?

He was Tony Stark: playboy, genius, billionaire, philanthropist.

He might not have been able to control or even predict whatever the hell had happened this morning, JARVIS’s mother-hen theorizing notwithstanding, but he could sure as hell end this on a note of his own choosing.

Tony stood up, brushing bits of scone from his fingers, ignoring the ache in his back and the mostly self-serving thing he was about to do. He keyed the release to the hidden door…and made his way to Thomas Pritchard’s office.

Just a little something to help carry him through the rest of his day.

Kit-Kat was in the office now, bag against the wall and headphones still in as she helped her friend collect the files she’d brought, a comforting hand on her shoulder as Big Red wiped away the last vestiges of tears. Pritchard was hovering nearby, not wanting to intrude as his client collected herself.

Tony was aware he didn’t have a plan so much as a last ditch effort to avoid his problems, but whatever—he was a professional at winging it.

He approached the office door, slipping into his second-nature skin of devastatingly seductive charm, inherent good looks, and lightning-fast wit kept on standby at all times. His Entitled Playboy side, Rhodey and Pepper called it. Apt, and exactly what he was going for.

Entitled Playboy Tony Stark didn’t have Iron Man’s problems. He wasn’t that person, but maybe if he donned the persona once again he could forget what he was hiding from. Maybe if he felt like the carefree, rich, genius brat, even for just a little while, he would feel less like a sacrificial chess piece with nightmares and a sudden fear of being alone.

Worth a shot.

He reached for the handle, steps silent on the carpet.

A smile was what he was aiming for…and maybe a teensy bit of blushing, if he was honest with himself. Wide eyes, a little bit of awe, an ounce of fainting—something along those lines. The usual reactions to ‘Holy Shit It’s Tony Fucking Stark’. But what he was really hoping for was one of those
sunshine smiles Kit-Kat had set free in the lobby. That first ray of pure light had done a number for his messed up morning, maybe if got one more up close it would fuel him all the way through his meeting with the Mayor.

Shaking hands with Big Red, asking about her day, and complimenting her husbands good work (whoever he was) wouldn’t hurt, either. Despite his competitors beliefs, Tony genuinely cared about his staff and their families and he genuinely cared they were being taken care of—now was a nice chance to show it. A little appreciation, an in-person display of gratitude and understanding, always did wonders to spread morale and encourage company pride among staff and their loved ones.

What would that be called, synergy? Synergy.

A service for the people.

Kit-Kat was just crouching down, oblivious to his presence as she struggled to fit the papers back in their bags, when Tony entered the office.

Big Red saw him first: she’d been exchanging pleasant goodbyes and thank-you’s with dear old Thomas, but now she fell silent, mouth falling open as she stared in disbelief. The balding man noticed the presence of his boss’s boss’s boss a tick later and immediately straightened—Tony could’ve sworn the man was fighting down a salute.

He smiled inside, feeling some of the weight vanish from his chest.

“Mr. Stark, s-sir,” Pritchard managed to stutter threw his shock, “I wasn’t aware you’d be stopping by today.” He adjusted his glasses hastily. “If I’d known there was an—”

Tony waved him off with ease. “Not an inspection, Thomas,” he reassured him, nipping that line of thought in the bud, “Nothing of the sort. Just had some time on my hands and thought I’d do a little research for a project I’ve got going on.” He felt the idea forming rapid-fire in the back of his mind and let it take charge.

Big Red, even taller now that he was up close, and with some freckles, too, was slack-jawed and lightly nudging the girl with her back turned to them. Kit-Kat shrugged her off, headphones still in place as she maneuvered things in the bag so the papers wouldn’t be crushed.

Thomas Pritchard was nodding sharply, shock fading away into business. “Absolutely, Mr. Stark, anything I can do to help.”

Tony gave out a huff of a laugh, grinning, and said, “No need to be formal, big guy, this is more of an unofficial undertaking that I think you,” he stressed, before turning to face the other captive member in his company, “and these lovely ladies will be able to help me with.”

Flashing his most award-winning, melt-them-at-their-core smile (really, his smile had won awards), he extended his hand toward the redhead. She snapped her mouth shut, seeming to remember she had that capability, and extended hers right back, beginning to blush around the ears.

Shiny-eyed and flustered, check.

Big Red shook his hand gingerly, staring from it to him and back again. He could practically see the gears falling into place in her head: ‘I’m shaking hands with Tony Stark I’m shaking hands with Tony Stark I’m shaking hands with Tony Stark’. More than a little star-struck, she looked like she might start giggling at the absurdity of it all, but there was no trace of embarrassment. In fact, she looked like she was thoroughly enjoying herself, filing it away as something to tell the kids someday. Her smile grew ten times its size as she persisted in tapping her friend to get her attention.
Tony hoped she succeeded.

“You see I’m working on something,” he began, commanding all the energy in the room, “that I’ll be discussing with the Mayor later today.”

Big Red was all but smacking her friend in the shoulder now, not a hint of subtlety to be found, and Tony’s self-esteem grew with each hit.

Take that, pool.

“Now that things have started to cool down—”

Smack.

“—and stock’s been taken of the situation—”

Smack.

“—I’m hoping to establish a broader sense of peoples’ opinions on the cleanup efforts—”

Smack.

“—and welcome any input for improvement—”

Smack.

That did it.

Kit-Kat stood up briskly, yanking out her headphones in one quick swipe. She didn’t get a chance to voice her annoyance before she followed the starry-eyed direction of her friends gaze.

The ‘What In The Seven Hells Could You Possibly Want’ look resting on her features, and she did have very pleasant features, vanished like a drop of water on a sunny day.

Up close, the analogy fit better than any other he might’ve dreamed of.

Ocean Eyes, Tony decided. It was much more suitable than Kit-Kat.

From the golden-spun hair she’d woven into a loose braid, now draping lazily over her shoulder, to the bright-eyed awareness on her pale, honeyed complexion, her eyes really were a piece of the sea dropped directly onto a field of sunlight.

Eyes that were now wide with utter incredulity.

And awe.

And a little bit of pink, dusted around her cheeks.

Check, check, and check.

If this were any other day, he might deem it complete. But it wasn’t, and he was hoping he could catch her smile up close to commit it to memory.

Without further ado Tony offered her his hand, dialing up the intensity of his Smolder, gave her the most charming grin he’d ever cultivated, and waited.

It took her a little longer than it had her friend to come around to the fact that yes, this was
happening. The ‘Oh My God Mom Why Aren’t You Answering Your Phone The Coolest Thing Ever Just Happened’ look, as he liked to call it. Pritchard was waiting patiently in the corner, having endured the likes of this before; he had, in fact, been in this very position himself.

When she finally snapped to, gaping like a fish only slightly and staring at the proffered hand as though it belonged to a god—to which Tony was of course flattered and familiar—Ocean Eyes allowed herself this small thing and let him take her hand in both of his.

And she smiled.

It wasn’t the same one from the lobby—not as severe, not as uncontrollable, not as borderline blinding—but it was just as mesmerizing and it was directed entirely at him. Just at him. It was all sorts of luminescent as it danced at the corners of her lips, drawing and igniting her whole being into one, supercharged beam.

It was far more lethal than the one before could’ve ever been.

Tony was unequivocally, unreservedly spellbound.

Inside, he suddenly felt like the fish.

Decades of public-consciousness had at least trained him not to act like one. Jesus.

It was because of that training, he supposed, the need to fill uncomfortable silences, or maybe he was just too preoccupied with how snuggly her hand fit in his that he went and did the stupidest thing he could’ve done.

Tony Stark opened his big fat mouth:

“I thought you did great on that last one, by the way—a Redford classic, but not one of his most well known.”

Her grip slackened…

…and the smile fell from her face.

If his brain had caught up with him before he’d said the words, it would’ve slammed against his skull with a sledgehammer to shut him the hell up: She didn’t know she had an audience, idiot.

It took him a little longer to realize it didn’t matter. Through whatever sixth sense people possessed, stronger in some than in others, Tony realized it was not the implication behind the words so much as the words themselves.

No matter the suggestion, it wasn’t enough to warrant the reaction he got.


But a warped design of the Five Stages of Grief? No.

Terror was certainly the last thing he’d expected.

Ocean Eyes was looking at him as if he were the damn Oracle of Delphi, handing out terrible and unavoidable fates, and all of them to her. The expression that endured beyond the others had settled onto her face like an old lover, familiar to her features, but unwanted and as if it hadn’t been seen in a long time. It was wholly discomfiting, so utterly wrong and sad and grave. It had no business being there.
He didn’t like it, and he certainly didn’t know what he’d done to sanction it.

Her hand started to tremble in his. He could see and feel the tremors working themselves through her now-very-small-looking frame. It was as if her body jumped straight to crying but left the tears behind.

She looked like she wanted to die.

In his mad scramble of confusion, his half-baked jumbles of fix this, fix this, fix this now, he failed to notice Big Red had gone stock still beside the two, amusement at the situation nothing but a distant memory.

Before the girl with the ocean eyes and the sunshine smile even seemed to taste them, the words slipped from her lips:

“Dear god, not you.”

He heard them.

Tony was sure she hadn’t meant for him to hear them, but he did.

Dear god, not you.

Dear god, not you.

Dear god, not you.

Ah.

A strange sort of flutter danced down his spine.

He had tried for decades, decades, to forget those four words. To forget them and twist them and appeal to all known and unknown forces ‘please don’t let them mean what I think they mean’. A mistake of phrase, surely. They had haunted his steps, mocked him, poisoned him. They had taken pieces of him, perhaps the best pieces, and ripped them to shreds, before shoving those shreds back into the cavity left behind.

He could feel them even now, burning on the inside of his left forearm with a fire so fierce he thought she might combust in turn.

Tony could practically hear the cackling of Fate as it danced around him now, singing: “Well—here you go.”

Yeah. Here they went.

Somewhere out in a tiny corner of the finite Infinite, where it succeeded in shattering the glass bubble of his own, this moment had just clicked, been noted, and was being filed away in the memory of the universe.

A fixed moment for the cosmos.

Paramount.

He knew. She clearly knew.

Her eyes, those ocean eyes, were wide with panic as she realized what she’d done.
There was a split second where Tony knew what she was going to do before she did it. Still, he wasn’t prepared.

His Soulmate bolted.

*

In retrospect, he wasn’t sure what to call it.

Panic?

Desperation?

A lifetimes worth of insecurities and abandonment issues culminating in a whole Nope’s worth of overreaction?

All valid, all likely.

At this point he vaguely longed for the input of, well, literally any one of his more clear-headed friends.

Or JARVIS. Yeah.

If he’d been in his lab, or even the suit, then JAY would be advising him sternly that, ‘No, sir, I do not believe chasing one’s Soulmate across a lobby counts as a positive first impression.’

His better judgment certainly would’ve advised him against tackling her to the floor.

Which, without JAY’s better judgment, he of course did.

They hit the ground in a sprawling mess, mere feet from the motion-opened elevator.

She was strong for such a scrawny thing. Or maybe she was just that determined to get away from him.

Either way she was fast, already wriggling free of his awkward grip, quick as a whip as he did his damnedest to hold on.

When it was clear he was going to lose this round—her twisting and turning was just too wild and he didn’t want to lose a limb—he shouted out one of his voice-activated security measures and hoped they were distinct enough to be heard.

The elevator doors were still wide open, but a clear protective barrier began to descent over the entrance.

His Soulmate saw this.

With one last hallelujah and a blessed near-miss to the groin, Ocean Eyes squirmed free of Tony’s grasp and slipped under the barrier, just in time. But she was missing something.

Tony looked at the shoe he’d managed to wrestle free in her escape, then looked at her.

She looked at him, then to her shoe.

Tony could’ve said something nice. Or noteworthy. Something suave or endearing or diplomatic or placating. Could’ve, probably should’ve suggested they both take a breath for a second and just calm
down.

Instead he brandished the poor shoe like a bargaining chip and declared, “Well, it’s mine now.”

Ocean Eyes glared at him.

He stared at her, challenging.

“Gimme’ back my shoe,” she said finally, voice not sure of the tone it wanted to take.

“No,” he said.

“Give it.”

“Nope.”

“It’s my shoe,” she snarled.

“It’s mine now,” he clarified. “You’ll have to come get it.”

She stared at him, at a loss for words.

Tony watched her eye the shoe, look back at him, back to the shoe. He expected her to argue some more. Expected another demand. Instead she backed as far away as she could, never turning her back on him as though he might pounce through the glass, and pressed a number into the elevator.

The billionaire watched as the door closed over her sea eyes and her sunlit hair, taking his Soulmate far, far away from him.

He could command a stop to the elevator or have her detained downstairs. Could order any number of things.

But he didn’t.

He let her go, too dumbfounded to contemplate anything else.

Tony stood there, blind and deaf to the world around him, breathing hard and not from the struggle.

She’d run from him. His Soulmate had run from him.

He doubled over, hands on his knees and shoe still clutched in his fist, to search for some kind of solid ground. He barely noticed when Big Red sidled up next to him, staring at the space her friend had been in. She had both bags slung over her shoulder and was clutching a pair of discarded headphones in her hand. His Soulmate was so desperate to be as far from him as possible she had left her belongings, and her friend, behind.

Big Red looked at Tony now, studying and dissecting him as if the meeting in the office was nothing but a fantasy and she was only just seeing him for the first time.

When she opened her mouth, all that came out was a mystified, “Huh.”

The redhead bit her lip in thought, sweeping him up and down with no shortage of consideration. There was an edge to her look, a tightness in her gaze that did nothing to put him at ease; she was struggling with an enigma all her own, and from her face it was a conundrum for the ages.

“Huh,” she said again.
That was all he got.

That was all Tony Stark got as Big Red left him there in a daze, sidling off to the melody of ‘huh’ in pursuit of her friend, leaving him clutching a shoe like a lifeline and wondering just where the hell gravity had gone to.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so excited to finally be getting this one out, it's been a long time coming! I aim to update every other Sunday, so keep an eye out if you're interested :)}
A huge, huge thank you to everyone who commented/subscribed/etc! I'm glad you liked the first chapter!

This chapter isn't as long as the first, but I'd still call it sizeable. Hopefully this length enables me to update more frequently.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Arty.”
Silence.
“Arty.”
More silence.
“…Arty.”

Brit didn’t expect an answer and the mound of tangled sheets containing her friend didn’t give one.

She suppressed a sigh and moved carefully into the room, working with what little light peaked from behind her friends closed blinds and the light from the hallway she herself had just vacated. She considered briefly resting a hand on her shoulder, checking for a pulse, something to let Arty know she wasn’t alone. But she’d only have gotten the same response as she had in the last two days—a whole lot of nothing.

Admitting she was at an impasse but not defeat, Brit placed a box of crackers and a fresh glass of water on the nightstand, eyeing the four still-untouched glasses dourly.

Arty needed to drink something, and soon. She hadn’t touched a morsel of food or a drop of water since the day of Brit’s appointment when the redhead had found her, doubled over in an alley outside Stark Tower, puking her guts out. Getting her into a cab and back to the apartment hadn’t helped any, only left both girls on the floor of the bathroom as Brit held back her hair and Arty became acquainted with the toilet bowl in a new fashion as she dry-heaved and trembled and sweat herself into unconsciousness.

Despite Brit’s best efforts, and a serious desire to call for help, Arty remained more or less catatonic.

“I’ve gotta’ go to work, Arty-Pants,” she tried again, speaking lowly into the bedroom-turned-tomb. JT was an understanding guy, especially with the soft spot he had for the pair, but even he couldn’t afford to have them both miss another shift on their busiest night of the week. No matter how desperately she wished to be here when Arty inevitably realized she was, in fact, still alive on this Earth, Brit had to go in.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, ‘kay? Maybe JT’ll let me go early.” Nothing, just the subtle shift that indicated Arty was at least breathing.
Brit suppressed another sigh and made for the door. Knowing she was speaking to empty ears, she finished with a desperate hope, “Try to eat something, please... please.”

*

When she returned five hours later, JT having indeed let her go early, the food remained untouched and the glasses still full; she wasn’t sure her friend had budged an inch

So with resignation and no small amount of sympathy, Brit stripped off her makeup, changed into one of Marcos’ sleeping shirts, and crawled into bed beside her friend, wrapping an arm around her and squeezing gently. It was human nature for the body to respond to physical comfort—maybe if she held Arty long enough it would stimulate some kind of reaction. At this point, she would settle for anything: crying, screaming, more puking.

Anything.

But deep in the recesses of her friend’s mind, a movie was playing. The reel was jammed, stuck on repeat, unceremoniously showing Arty decade-old memories she’d wished never to see again and things she’d seen before in an awfully new light:

*Her mother, crying. Ripping at her hair and cursing the world.*

Tony Stark, face on every paper and news channel for weeks and weeks with the headlines in bold: *Stark Missing, CEO Presumed Captured, Billionaire Believed Dead After Three Months.*

*Her mother, medication removing every trace of passion, sitting at the window for days and forgetting, forgetting, forgetting.*

Tony Stark, standing before a press conference after his escape in Afghanistan, pale-faced and thin and oh-so-fragile looking.

*Her mother, screaming again, screaming at her and everyone and needing to reclaim what was stolen.*

Tony Stark, surrounded by a sea of burning cars on a racetrack in Monaco, suitless and defenseless as some maniac tried to kill him.

*Her mother, unmoving on the kitchen floor, red painting the ivory tiles. Arty is only nine, she doesn’t understand why.*

Tony Stark, footage grainy through shaky camera phones as he flies into a wormhole with a nuke on his back.

*Her mother, back on the meds.*

*Her sister. Her beautiful, hopeful sister, falling to her knees when the news from the fires come, collapsing in on herself as her own girls watch: ‘Why isn’t Daddy coming home?’ Repeat, repeat, repeat.*

Tony Stark, falling from the sky. Motionless.

Gas and leather.

Gas and leather.

Gas and leather.
Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Arty squeezed her eyes shut.

* * *

Tony exchanged the set of pliers for a welding tool and did everything in his power to ignore the manila folder on the table behind him.

The heel on the Mark VII’s right boot was being finicky, not as up-to-snuff as the rest of the suit he was slowly repairing. Adjusting his angle at the worktable, he searched for necessary realignments before searing two jagged sections closed. He technically didn’t even need to fix it—he was beyond the design now, already taking what he’d learned from it and running with the next half-dozen models that emerged from the experience. Call him sentimental, though no one else was likely to.

Tony set down the welder and picked up an impact wrench, easing one of the settings loose.

No, he didn’t need to fix it, but he was. Maybe they’d stick it in a museum some day, on some display that read: ‘See the Suit Iron Man Wore to Space’. Tony felt a shiver traverse his spine and banished the thought.

He didn’t care for whatever excuse needed to be used, focusing on the MARK VII meant he wasn’t focusing on the silent, yet obscenely loud portfolio at his back.

Dear god, not you.

Tony’s eye twitched. He replaced the impact wrench and took up the welder again.

Besides, if he was focused on repairing something he could now deem antiquated, it meant he was less likely to let something slip by with the newer suits.

He shifted directions once more to face any side of the lab but back there.

Tony knew it was right where he left it, too, didn’t even have to look.

Just felt the burn of the words on his inner forearm as if someone had branded them to his soul—which was pretty damn apt, all things considered.

Dear god, not you.

It was fifteen feet behind him, at approximately a thirty-degree angle to his right, and precisely three and half feet off the ground.

Dear god, not you.

It would take six strides, maybe five depending on his commitment, to reach it.

Dear god, not you.

One measly flick of his finger was all it would take to flip the cover and reveal the contents.

Dear god, not you.

It would all be there. All of it. Everything from school records to driver’s license to medical insurance and every job she’d ever had. Everything he could’ve possibly wanted to know, maybe even an explanation for why she’d said—
Dear god, not you.

The welding tool slipped in his right hand and arced sharply across the knuckles of his left.

Tony released the tool and jumped up with a curse, banging his knee on the underside of the workstation as he did.

The pain in his knee was nothing compared to the pain in his hand, but even that wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been. Tools had been slipping and scarring his hands for decades, leaving a lot of the skin tough as nails and leaving him conditioned to handle the sensation. The reaction was more from surprise and chagrin at his own carelessness than real hurt.

Still it stung, and the smell of burnt flesh was less than favorable

Taking care not to bump his injured appendage, Tony made his way backward to the med-supplies everyone insisted he keep in his labs, ignoring the file that was the focal point of his consternation. It was resting there out of the corner of his eye, still as could be. It might as well have been shouting. He waved his uninjured hand and the first aid kit popped open, gears whirring as the contents were raised up and out of the box on levels, displayed for ease of use.

Tony grabbed a cool compress and held it to his knuckles, wincing.

Out of the corner of his eye, the pale vanilla color teased him with knowledge.

He turned to glare at it head-on.

The folder sat there, mocking him. 

“Shut up,” he told it.

“You already informed me to remain quiet, Sir.”

Tony scowled at the ceiling. “Not you, JARVIS—well actually, yes, you too. Who said you were out of time-out?”

“I was never in time-out, Sir.”

“Funny, I seem to remember otherwise.”

“Perhaps you are in need of an MRI, then. Or perhaps Vitamin B-12.”

“Cute, JAY. Rhodey teach you that one?”

“I am above the need to recycle jokes, Sir—I am quite capable of making my own. You designed me so yourself.”

Tony bit back a sharp remark and returned to glaring at the folder. ‘I know something you don’t know’, it seemed to taunt him.

‘No kidding’, he thought grimly. ‘You know everything I don’t know’.

And it was true. Anything and everything about Ocean Eyes should be in that file: who she was, where she came from, occupation, list of friends and family, dating history, interests and ideologies, political leanings and her frickin’ star sign, for all he knew—name it and it was probably there. A conglomerate summary of his Soulmate’s life, compiled from public records and immediate or associated social media platforms.
Something in that pile was bound to provide the answer that tormented him, something to tell him why.

Why did she run?

It was an easier question by far than the one that really plagued him, shadowing all his steps these long years, latched onto his person like a parasite as it drained, drained, drained away his life:

Why don’t you want me?

Now that he had a face, and those eyes—those infinite, terrified, devastatingly haunting eyes that had been so playful, so crowned with joy before he went and was Him—it made the question with which he was cursed to endure so much worse.

Why don’t you want me, Ocean eyes?

The portrait of her running from him was so crystalline, so utterly vivid in essence Michelangelo himself must have descended the heavens to cast his agony immortal.

Tony glared at the file some more, mentally burning holes as big as the ones she’d left him with.

He hadn’t looked at it. Not a single page. For all that he craved release from the wild unknown, he just couldn’t bring himself to turn the cover. It wasn’t his place.

It wasn’t like Tony was responsible for its presence in his lab to begin with. All he’d asked was for JAY to figure out who she was—as in whether she was a local resident, possible contact information, current employment, that sort of thing. What he hadn’t asked for was every facet of her existence, big or small, concrete or speculative, from birth till, well, now.

In hindsight, he’d really just wanted her goddamn name.

Sixty hours of (sleep deprived) delirium and Tony Stark didn’t even have his Soulmate’s name.

But JARVIS was JARVIS, and like his creator didn’t know the meaning of “half-ass”.

So instead of something he could call his mate besides Ocean Eyes, Tony now had an ethical crisis regarding a breach of privacy on his hands, a raging migraine, one sassy AI who didn’t appreciate Tony’s lack of enthusiasm for his efforts, and scorched knuckles. Just what the doctor prescribed.

A soft nudge at his elbow brought him back.

DUM-E was chirping at his side, turning his utility arm this way and that as he cooed miserably “I’m fine, DUM’s” Tony said, removing the compress to show the bot. “Just a little singed. No need to get the fire extinguisher.”

The bot whirred and started that direction anyways.

“No, I said don’t get the fire extinguisher, god do you need your bolts cleane—” Tony stopped mid-sentence, reminding himself his oldest bouncing baby boy was still sensitive and just eager to make up for distressing his Pops earlier that morning. Or was it last night? When you couldn’t sleep the dichotomy was irrelevant. After JARVIS had finished running ‘Operation: Soulmate’, DUM-E had been tasked by the AI to deliver said classified documents straight to the man himself. Sadly, in his earnest to Do A Good Job and Make Dad Happy, his means of delivery meant dropping the thick folder like a slab onto a flat-head screwdriver that was very-regrettably-wedged-in-a-not-at-all-
Tony’s-fault-way under his coffee mug; the mug had been sent flying quite spectacularly across the lab. DUM-E had spent the remaining time since cleaning and mewing with guilt: he had made a mess and the classified documents did not Make Dad Happy.

Removing the folder from the puddle of coffee had been the only time Tony touched the…thing.

The knowledge-hoarding entity sung softly to him now, entrancing him with promises of the treasure it possessed. Whether the voice embodied belonged to that of an angel or a siren, to lure Tony to salvation or doom…well.

“Shut up,” he told it again.

* * *

Arty was sitting upright.

Brit did a triple-take to make sure she wasn’t dreaming, blinking furiously to scrub the veil of sleep from her mind.

Nope, definitely upright—but barely. The blonde was hunched over oddly, as though the effort to configure her posture was impossible in light of three days’ muscular disuse and zero nutrition, and she was relying on the wall beside the bed for support. Still, she was up, and the small move might as well have been Atlas taking the sky from her weary shoulders.

In the dim morning light that glowed through the still-closed blinds, she could just make out Arty fiddling with something in her lap.

The redhead opened her mouth, thought better of disturbing the silence, and snapped it shut again.

Careful not to startle her friend, Brit eased herself off the mattress and gently padded her way to the window with all the grace her dancing afforded her, opening the blinds just enough to allow a little life into the room. Arty blinked at the infusion of light slowly, heavily, like she was dragging herself to the surface of a mud bank, but otherwise gave no sign she registered the change in surroundings. She just kept poking at the object in her hands. Illumination on her side, Brit beheld with the scene with utter relief: one of the glasses on the nightstand was now, thankfully, half empty, and the box of crackers was in her friends lap as she struggled to reach the contents. Little pieces of cardboard littered the blanket, peeled off bit by bit, as if she’d forgotten the fine motor skills to slip a finger under the flap and pry away the adhesive and had instead resorted to just tearing the thing pathetically.

But it was a good sign.

Brit watched Arty silently bumble through her process for a few minutes. She eventually managed to pull the freshness-sealed bag from the tattered box, success in her grasp, only to find an equal fight in opening the plastic as she pulled uselessly at both sides.

Unable to stand it, Brit closed the space to the bed. “Here,” she said gently and reached for the crackers, “let me.”

Somewhere in the back of Arty’s throat rose a strangled sound of resistance. However alert she might or might not have been, she could do it herself.

Brit dropped the offer, giving a little nod.

Baby steps.
When it came to the rest of the day, though, baby steps turned out to be just that, complete with Brit having to use a guiding hand to get Arty anywhere.

With great difficulty the redhead managed to remove the Detached From This Plane of Existence girl from her self-imposed mausoleum and into the living room, careful not to let her friend stub her toes—it might’ve certainly gotten a reaction, but Brit wasn’t in the business of losing limbs. She settled Arty on the couch with the squishiest pillow they owned, plopped in *Finding Nemo* (because every other movie she’d reached for elicited varyingly negative half-noises that were the closest things to sentience she’d received in three days), and set the crackers and a water bottle within easy reach before cozying up next to her.

Brit was able to stay with her through two and a half re-watches, easing a comforting hand through blonde hair that could really use a wash, before she regrettably got up. She had a class to go to. She didn’t exactly want to watch *Nemo* on repeat all day, and it wasn’t as if she was worried Arty was going to up and leave the apartment, but she was hoping to be here if her friend needed her.

She laid a gentle hand on the girls’ head. “I’ve got another class, Arty, I’ll be back in a few hours, okay?”

Arty’s eyes tracked her face, the way survival instinct bade them to, but otherwise she gave no response.

Brit needn’t have worried about missing anything—when she came home hours later, sun just setting below the horizon, Arty was right where she’d left her, movie still chugging along.

But hey, the water bottle was empty and the crackers mostly gone.

Good.

*

When the maniacal giggling started on Day Four, erupting from the despondent girl to settle in the apartment like a permanent resident, Brit was decidedly and unreservedly not a fan.

They were halfway through what had to be their sixteenth re-watch, Brit’s legs tossed over Arty’s own to keep her warm, when the blonde had started to laugh—little laughs at first, a low chuckle, really, before growing in volume and frequency to become an all-out guffaw. There were tears leaking from her eyes and she was struggling to breathe, she was laughing so hard.

Arty caught Brit’s concerned eye in time to pull herself together and speak her first words in four days:

“So stupid,” she said, grinning madly whilst trying not to wheeze. “Stupid.”

Then she kept giggling, caught on the fantastical tide of whatever realization had pierced her bubble of lethargy to become so amusing.

Brit decided not to comment. She didn’t even know what she’d be commenting on.

But whatever humorous notion had occurred to Arty to yank her back to the land of the living kept at her the rest of the day, nipping at her heels like the world’s funniest cobra. The slightest thing would set her off into a fresh round of snickering, like the world was a theme park and everything in their apartment a ride.
The pigeon cooing outside the living room window? Hysterical.

The two marshmallows stuck together from the box of cereal she was devouring? Priceless.

The empty water bottle that fell to the carpet with a light *putt*? Practically a stand-up comedian.

On the one hand, Brit was grateful *something* had spurred her friend back to a status she cautiously labeled “functioning”, as the girl fetched her own water and pursued her own snacks all by herself. On the other hand, she didn’t find it particularly comforting to wander into the kitchen to find Arty cackling into the cupboard like the Joker, either.

You had to pick and choose your battles, she supposed, but that didn’t stop her from wishing this one came with a manual.

About the only control Brit had came from switching the box of Lucky Charms Arty was carrying around with her like a lifeline to a box of Multigrain Cheerios when she wasn’t looking. Her girl might be losing her sanity, but damned if the redhead wasn’t going to make sure she at least got some vitamins.

She regret the decision two hours later when Arty breezed by her on the way to her room, empty cereal bag clutched determinedly in both hands and a dreamy grin on her face.

Brit eyed the bag with concern. “Say, uh, whatcha doin’ with that bag there?”

Arty smiled wide. “Gonna’ strangle myself.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“…Kinda small, don’t you think?”

The blonde examined the plastic closely as if just now considering its dynamics. “…Oh.”

“Yeah,” Brit said, nodding thoughtfully. “Guess that’s kind of out of the question, Arty-Pants. No death for you today.”

For whatever reason logic fancied throwing itself out a window, *that* seemed to be the thing Brit said that sunk in. She could see the words settle over Arty, eyes betraying the way they absorbed into her skin to rack against her sense of awareness.

The blonde looked back at the bag. “Yeah. Guess so.”

If Brit were in the field of psychological evaluation, Arty would’ve made a fascinating case study on Coping 101, she thought as the girl threw the bag in the trash and flopped beside her on the couch once more; and if Arty were her normal self she probably would’ve taken advantage of her own damn suffering and volunteered as such. Made them a little cash on the side.

But Brit wasn’t a psychologist—certainly not one of those scientists who devoted their entire professional lives to the understanding of Soul Marks and their impact—and Arty wasn’t her normal self. She was going through every process in the book to manage what she’d dreaded her entire life, however backwards it appeared, but coping was coping.

Johnni was just a phone call away if Arty needed that extra push to land back on the good side.

Brit crossed her fingers and felt hoped her friend would pull herself out.
On day five they hit the ground running in terms of progress—toddler steps took a leap, graduated from high school and were now on their way to college. Not only did Brit manage to get Arty into the shower, it’s two hours length notwithstanding, but she also managed to get slippers on her feet and her friend out of the house for a little grocery shopping. Arty might not have been any help coming up with the list, but she could at least push the cart and help her carry things home.

In combination with (relatively) fresh air and the sensation of new life showers seemed to bestow upon people, the exercise did Arty a world of good.

They were in line at the checkout when something just clicked.

“Shit,” Arty exclaimed with dread, causing a mother nearby to glare daggers as she covered her kid’s ears. The blonde didn’t even notice.

“I missed my deadline,” she moaned, elbows propped against the cart and face buried in her hands. “Laurent’s gotta’ be so mad at me, he wanted that article by Tuesday.”

“No you didn’t,” Brit reassured her, piling their items on the conveyer belt. “I called him, asked for an extension. Told him you had an unfortunate encounter with some alien tech the cleanup crews missed, so he just said get it to him ASAP and you’d be good.”

Some of the color crept back onto Arty’s face as she sighed with relief. “Thank you,” she said, then wrinkled her face in deep thought. “Huh. I wonder if I can pull off that excuse again.” Her eyes narrowed as she worked it out in her head. “Like, ‘Sorry boss, can’t come in today, tripped over some alien limb and now I’m infected with sad space disease’? Arty reached into the cart and handed Brit the peanut butter. “Or the next time I need to do my taxes I can just call ‘em up and say ‘Sorry, no can do, some extraterrestrial metal just warped me off the planet, talk to you when I get back’? Think that’d work?”

A smile crept onto the redheads face as she took the peanut butter and the bread next. Roll with what you can get, her mother always told her. “Absolutely worth a shot. They can’t definitively prove you’re lying from the other side of the country.”

Arty was nodding, each nod seeming to chase away the last vestiges of haze clinging to her eyes. Then she paled. “Oh god, what about JT? How mad is he? How many shifts did I miss?”

Brit winced. “Three,” she said, but bowled over the moan that was sure to follow. “I took one for you, and he was pretty understanding about the other two. He just said to make sure you’re back at it by Friday or he riots—oh, he also said you had to make it up by taking another bar shift.”

The blonde was silent for a moment. “Fair enough,” she conceded.

Brit was just accepting the pasta when Arty groaned again, almost dropping the box. “Please, please, please tell me you didn’t miss any lessons because of me? That’s half the reason you came here and I was supposed to—fuck, I’m the one who should be taking care of you, not the other way around.”

“Didn’t miss any lessons,” she cut her off, wanting to end this cycle. “Not a one. You’ve just been so out of it you didn’t notice when I left.”

Arty’s face was a mixture of half relief, half frown. “What else did I miss?”

“Well…your mom called.”
Stony silence.

“…And your sisters. Couple of times.”

Anxiety was starting to crack the stone.

“Don’t worry,” she soothed lowly, casting a small glance at the patrons around them. “I didn’t tell them anything. Just said you had the flu. They bought it.”

The blonde handed her the tomatoes.

“And also Jimmy called again. Like five times.”

Arty made a strangled noise of frustration behind her facepalm.

“Yeah. You know, when you said he was overprotective I didn’t think you meant to this degree. Thought he was gonna’ call the local sheriff to come check on us. Told him the flu story, too, but you need to calm him down before he flies over here himself.”

“Ugh,” her friend collapsed over the cart.

But despite Arty’s distress the redhead was smiling, beaming from the inside out. It was good to have her friend back.

When they made it back to the apartment an hour later, stored the groceries and settled onto the couch with the poor persons dinner of PB&J’s to watch Monty Python, Brit asked the question she could no longer contain. She didn’t want to push Arty and the last thing she wanted was to trigger another shutdown, but she needed to know the terrain she was working with here, needed to know the acceptability of bringing it up.

“Sooo…are we gonna’ address the iron armor in the room?”

“Nope.”

“Okay.” One thing at a time, then.

On a personal note Brit rather believed the public school system had failed her: she had been led to believe, when dealing with situations that put ones worldly perspective through a metal grinder, that denial came before the depression. Arty had leapt right over that first part straight into the Land of Despair, hop-scotched towards Acceptance Isle, and was now circling back towards the Pit of Can’t Be…the redhead was getting whiplash. But even as she thought it she knew that assessment wasn’t fair. Arty was dealing with it in her own way. She wasn’t denying anything, and she hadn’t done anything drastic; she was processing, however slowly, and wouldn’t open herself to discussing it until she had a firmer handle on her own sense of ground. The blonde never tackled a problem until she was sure of her own place in the equation.

And this…this was an equation for sure. Square roots, finding \(x\), carrying the remainder or the decimal or whatever the hell it was people did in calculus—math had never been Brits strong point. The whole shebang, the cat’s cannoli. Not the simple add-subtract-and-dismiss they’d projected Arty might deal with when the person she’d never ever wanted to meet came stumbling into her life…not fucking Iron Man.

Brit shook her head, suddenly glad all she had to live with was whiplash.

They went back to watching Monty Python.
Aglow with the last rays of the day’s sun, the simple black sneaker spun gracefully through the air before landing with barely a sound in Tony’s outstretched hand. He paused a moment to maintain his rhythm, then tossed the shoe skyward once more. Painstakingly scraping what remained of his mental fortitude from the walls of his mind was a chore of magnanimous proportions, but it needed to be done.

“Look alive, DUM-E—you’re about to earn your keep,” he declared. Beside the window, his eldest warbled expectantly, armed with a dry erase marker and ready to make up for his fiasco two days ago.

Firmly establishing a sedentary pace, brows furrowed in concentration, Tony broke it down:

“It could be Iron Man,” he said out loud, marking the path between window and workstation with his meandering gate. DUM-E scribbled on the window.

“It could be…me.” He didn’t like the idea of that one, but it had merit: his past was inextricably tied with the military-industrial complex and all that entailed, despite his full-force efforts to course correct.

DUM-E wrote ‘Dad’ in crude letters, marker screeching audibly against the glass.

Tony sent the shoe airborne once more, caught it soundlessly, tossed it up again.

“It could be the women,” he admitted as he hesitated in his path, gripping the poor sneaker and pondering the choice’s validity as he watched the sun kiss the horizon. There had been many, at one point in Tony’s life—sleeping his way through his problems had been a primary means of avoiding them. Rhodey’d had his own firm opinions on why that had been, all of them boiling straight down to the words now covered by the billionaire’s sleeve, but Colonel James Rhodes had also learned long ago not to vocalize them, less he send his friend spiraling straight to the bottom of a bottle. Not that any of that was apropos of Tony’s life now: since Afghanistan he’d been too busy fixing the world to focus on addressing his own complex with trust and intimacy.

DUM-E was struggling, the most recent scrawl on his list resembling something along the lines of ‘W<>mFN’.

Tony inhaled deeply and continued to pace, Ocean Eye’s shoe taking flight. He’d cross that bridge when he, when they, came to it, but for now he didn’t want to kill his stride.

He snatched the shoe mid-air and pointed it straight at DUM-E, spitballing:

“She might be a Volitionist.”

But even as he said the words, and even as he winced at DUM-E’s entirely illegible scribble, he knew that wasn’t the case. “Nevermind, scratch that.”

He’d met one or two of the cultists in person, seen some of their programs floating around and some of their rallies on TV, same as everyone else. Volitionists were weird, and it would definitely explain the reaction she’d had, but he dismissed the idea almost immediately. Ocean Eyes didn’t fit the profile. He knew precious little about her, was able to infer slightly less, but even someone who wasn’t a certified genius such as himself could see there was zero resemblance. Those Volitionists who hadn’t already had their Marks burned beyond recognition during the cults initiation ritual tended to react with anger, insult, and disgust at finding their mates, if not outright hostility—his Soulmate had displayed nothing but despair.
Tony rolled his neck, working out the kinks. He’d passed out briefly in the lab the night before, unconscious too short a time to earn a respite from his woes but long enough gift him a stiff neck and a fancy new set of nightmares.

He reckoned his brain as he paced.

There was also the possibility Tony’d been intensely, vehemently avoiding: that his Soulmate was already taken.

He didn’t say this one out loud, didn’t know how much stock he put into it anyways. JARVIS had promised to keep his mouth shut about the information contained in the file, but he felt confident the AI would’ve broken said promise to give him a heads up if he had a potential uh, confrontation in his future. There certainly had been no ring on her finger.

In the end, all of the options had their place in the Realm of Possibility, all as likely as not and many more probably left out.

Tony let his eyes drift shut and sighed.

Despite the DUM-E-certified measure to solidify his theories, he was well enlightened they might as well have been whispered words in a storm for all the good writing them down did. They were theories, pure supposition, designed by definition to leave him searching for truth.

Tony had every intention of finding it.

Tony had every intention of finding her.

His hesitance in attacking the situation head-on was just that: he didn’t want to scare her away. She’d run from him then, who was to say she wouldn’t feel cornered and do it again? By the misfortune of being himself, there was nothing Tony could do that might come across as subtle.

All in all, he was left with two handfuls of diddly and squat about how to proceed.

His song-and-dance show was all flash and no substance, having more to due with stalling till a brilliant solution presented itself. Something to keep his brain moving and his demons at bay.

“If I may, Sir, perhaps sleep will provide the inspiration you seek.”

“You’re not invited to this party, JARVIS,” Tony sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose and bemoaned the fact the AI knew him so well.

“DUM-E was invited.”

“A—Dum’s is being useful, and B—Dum’s won the contest,” he said as the bot cooed in the corner, now scribbling haphazardly at the window.

There’d truthfully been no contest. Tony was still peeved at JAY for the presence of the folder—he’d told DUM-E to hide it somewhere he wouldn’t be tempted to look for it, even though he’d seen it clear as day under the bin he kept for discarded projects.

Sighing his deepest sigh yet, Tony tapped the sneaker against his forehead in frustration. He’d write a check for any drop of helpful insight that didn’t involve admitting to JARVIS his desire to take a peak at those files.

Aside from what golden tidbits he’d soaked up in the HUMAN RESOURCES lobby days ago, the
only things Tony knew about Ocean Eyes were laid out thus: she wore a size 8 shoe, did a lot—and he did mean a lot—of walking (the relatively new exterior of the shoe was belayed by the shockingly well-worn sole), and she had great taste in friends. Judging by Big Red’s own reaction during That Moment, she’d been familiar enough with his mate’s words to recognize them. To hers and Ocean Eyes credit, it’d been days since then and Big Red hadn’t gone running to the closest news outlet with some fantastical story about the girl who was Iron Man’s Soulmate. Points all around.

“Would you like me to contact Colonel Rhodes for you, Sir? Or Miss Potts?”

Straight to it, then.

“No.”

JAY wasn’t saying he thought Tony didn’t have the chops to handle this alone, that the man wasn’t already doing everything in his power not to have a breakdown and needed help. To be honest, JAY wouldn’t dream such a thing. Tony’s mind filled it all in himself.

JARVIS didn’t want Tony to feel alone, plain and simple. Probably why he hadn’t stopped being a nuisance.

But Tony didn’t want to call Rhodey or Pepper or even Happy—not yet. This felt…his. It might not be feeling his in the best of ways at present, but it was his for now, Ocean Eyes was his Soulmate, and he should figure out how to approach her without the girl feeling the need to Usain Bolt away from him.

But how?


Tony stopped mid-turn, shoe poised for launch.

He stared at it, beginnings of an idea tickling at the back of his mind.

Then he smiled.

“On second thought JAY, there is one thing you can tell me.”

* * *

Around 10am on Thursday morning her phone buzzed.

From her place on the floor beside the couch, Arty sighed. She had just managed to wiggle her way into the tiny, barely-human-sized space between the couch and the coffee table to stretch. She really didn’t want to find a text saying Brit’d forgot her keys and needed to be let in so she ignored the text for now. If it was Brit, she’d know by the banging on the door any second.

Arty eased back into an elongated position, feeling the ache in her lower back from all the cramped sitting she’d forced her body to endure. The sun was dappled along the carpet before her, cast off the gleaming lacquer of the coffee table and warming her toes as she relaxed as much as she could into the pose. She was trying to meditate, too, doing her best to call upon the tools for clarity and discernment Johnni always recommended to break down and clear her tumultuous thoughts.

It wasn’t working. Not in this case anyways.
Her phone buzzed again.

Well, if it wasn’t Brit it was probably Jim. Arty hadn’t had a chance to get back to him and his Overprotective Frenzy and she wasn’t feeling at her best to put him at ease—she was normally a flawless liar, but currently she was what one might declare as being ‘at the bottom of their game’.

She sighed and pawed at the couch cushions, searching for her phone by touch. She felt the cool case and brought it to her level.

It wasn’t Jim.

Displayed on screen was a message from an unknown number.

A picture message, it looked like.

Arty opened it, fingers already primed to mark it directly as spam, before her breath caught in her throat and her gut did a somersault.

In the picture her absentee shoe was propped against some kind of box, laces tied to perfection, sitting forlorn but perfectly positioned to capture the morning light. Resting beside the footwear, angled just-so for effect, was a note. In the crushingly-familiar scrawl she’d grown all too accustomed on her own skin, the note read:

FOUND: MISSING LEFTIE.

REQUESTS JAILER TO BE REUNITED WITH MOM.

AVAILABLE FOR PICKUP AT STARK TOWER.

Arty’s eye twitched.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters will be updated every other Sunday at the latest, but hopefully every Sunday if I pull off the writing/editing around work. No guarantees but I’ll do my best!

Also...guess who see each other again in Chapter 3?
I could never, ever have anticipated the positive response this would get and I am absolutely floored and overjoyed it (and Arty) have been embraced so quickly! Y’all have cleared my skin, watered my crops, and filled my bank account with all the kind words, so thank you <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Crunch.

The chip met its demise with muted finality even as Arty poked around the bag for another. She shook the plastic lightly, trying to better distribute the powdered flavor among her snack.

Picking her next casualty, one of those really big ones with the bubbles that made the most consumer-satisfied munching experience possible, Arty popped it into her mouth and eyed the clock.

10:02 a.m.

Huh. He was late.

Her phone was dark and silent against the chipped wood of the kitchen table (really nothing more than a desk) and Arty had to admit she was surprised. She resisted the urge to reach over and double-check, see if she’d missed it. She’d missed nothing, of course, because despite her dedication to be very-immediately-focused on the new article Laurent was begging for and nothing but the article, Arty had been sneaking glances at the little mobile regardless. Waiting.

Every day like clockwork, at 10am on the hour for the past six days, Arty’s phone would alight with a shiny new message.

She hadn’t been left stupefied as to how Tony Stark got her number in the first place. Arty had watched the live footage from the Senate Armed Services Committee fiasco herself, had seen the way the man easily took control of the government’s tech like a toy to turn it back against them. Instantly, effortlessly. Getting something as simple as her number wouldn’t even register in the field of time consuming.

Arty shifted a little in her seat, trying to get comfortable in the old chair but relishing the warmth of the sun on her back. She chose another chip and devoured it as well, focusing on her laptop and the barebones of the article for the tenth time: what little skeletal remains there were had been found a ways off from the Alpha Site, bones positioned in what the team surmised as a purposeful burial; though the dating results weren’t back yet, the team were working with a theory that it was related to, but much older than the primary site based on the state of bone-decay. The scattered weapon remnants from Alpha Site also indicated a battle, possibly related to ancient traditions of—

Arty eyed the clock once more. She couldn’t resist.

10:05.

Maybe he’d finally given up?
She tried to decide how she felt about that as she reached for the chips.

With a light buzz and a sudden glow her phone sprang to life.

Nevermind.

Arty’s hand spasmed reflexively toward the device as she took a deep breath, preparing for today's offering.

Closing one eye and peaking through the other, she unlocked the screen and looked.

It took everything in her power to force down the grin threatening to break free.

He’d gone all-out this morning. No wonder he was behind.

The day after his first message—for which he’d received no response because just what the hell was she supposed to say to that—the man in the tower sent a second image accompanied by a simple text. Her shoe, sitting on nicely-upholstered carpet in what looked to be some sort of lounge with the words: I HAVE BEEN GIVEN FREEDOM TO EXPLORE MY NEW PRISON. STILL WAITING FOR RESCUE.

The day after that and the billionaire changed tactics. Her black sneaker was captured (in perfectly photogenic lighting, she might add) dangling by its laces from the window of what was presumably a top floor, by presumably you-know-who: AHHHH. HELP ME MOM, YOU’RE MY ONLY HOPE. Arty would take it to her grave that she’d cracked a smile before hiding her phone in the fridge.

Day four and Leftie was back on the table, lit by a tech-genius’s version of a study lamp, a screwdriver and pair of pliers illuminated on the work surface with another handwritten note: SAVE ME! THE EVIL BILLIONAIRE IS TRYING TO STEAL MY SOLE!

He almost got her with that one. Almost. It was a terribly well known secret that puns were one of Arty’s weak spots. She’d hidden her phone in the bathroom cabinet that time. Temptation averted, mission accomplished.

After her summary response of absolutely squat, yesterday’s text had been a simple close-up, what she might’ve even described as a headshot for a sneaker, along with a single frowny face superimposed over the area of the toes.

Today took the cake, the pie, and the muffins.

Leftie was gracing the table once more, locked in some kind of glass box. There was a full sheet of cardstock propped up beside the clear cage, the corresponding message created with dozens of multi-sized and multi-colored letters cut from old magazines, tilted here and there for effect—an old-school ransom note: TIME IS RUNNING SHORT. ROOKIES DON’T MAKE IT OUT OF LOCKUP UNSCATHED. SPARE HIM.

Arty fought it. She really, really did. The smile was just beneath the surface but it was as persistent as her Soulmate. She fought it harder.

‘You hate this,’ her inner voice cautioned. ‘Remember? Soulmate is Bad, Soulmate is Pain. This is definitely not funny.’

‘This is hilarious as shit,’ her Funny Bone begged to differ.
‘*No,*’ the first voice scolded. ‘*Not funny. Not funny. Soulmates bring only suffering.*’

Even as her eyes were drawn to the living room to watch Brit’s feet bounce up and down joyfully over the edge of the couch, bubbly voice ecstatic as she spoke to her own far-away Mate, Arty knew that was categorically untrue. It was just her own damn family that was cursed. Soulmate’s didn’t exist for the sole purpose of testing one’s ability to withstand loss and torment. Soulmate’s didn’t exist to cause pain, pain, and more pain, with a heaping side order of self-destruction.

Though there were plenty more she could tick off on her fingers, Brit and Marcos were the foremost examples. They were happy. More than happy. They had their struggles, same as everyone else, but they tackled each with laser sharp determination and the innate need to be everything they could and more for each other, their love so consuming and nurturing it practically fed the nation.

By their love alone could the woes of the world be cured. By whatever Force That Was had bestowed humanity with the means of recognizing their preeminent Other, misery could hardly have been the goal.

‘*Which is exactly the problem, Arty,*’ her inner voice, sounding ever-so-much like her mother, admonished. ‘*Or don’t you recall?*’

Yes.

Arty could recall. Could never *not* recall. Scrub her mind with steel wool or drown her memories in acid, there were just some things that couldn’t be forgotten. She’d never be able to forget her mother: the highs and lows of the meds taking effect, the high and lows of the string of suitors she digested trying to find anything to fill the void, the highs and lows as they ran, all the time fleeing, escaping the bad and chasing down fantasies. She’d never be able to forget Sandra, idealistic and hopeful that it just wouldn’t be the same for her, embracing her own Soulmate because they could be happy and *

*I’m not Mom, Arty*’ she would say over and over like a protective spell to herself; she’d never be able to forget the day her oldest sister was proven wrong. She’d never be able to forget the warmth of her mothers hand as she led her to the garage and into the old car, closing the garage door and starting the engine as she held her close and sang her lullabies and promised Arty she would never go through the same pain as the heady scent of exhaust and leather coaxed her to sleep, sleep, sleep.

The blonde shook her head furiously, blinking away the haze, struggled to force air into her constricting lungs as she clung to the lilting resonance of Brit’s voice from the other room.

She was fine. She was in the kitchen, she was fine.

Arty rolled her shoulders and breathed deep.

Her phone was still alive with the unanswered attempts of her Soulmate.

Unfortunately for her sanity and unfortunately for the not-mom voice in her head, the pictures were still funny. Arty gave him an A+ for effort and a thorough round of applause for the humor being right up her alley.

She had the perfect response, too, it seemed such a shame to let the opportunity pass her by…

‘*NOT FUNNY NOT FUNNY NOT FUNNY,*’ the voice was all but screaming now, full panic mode engaged. ‘*PAIN ONLY. DISENGAGE.*’

Arty stood with exasperation, the old chair shrieking a complaint as she made her way to the living room.
Voice falling silent, Brit looked at the phone clenched furiously in her friend’s hand before she understood the source of the girl’s ire. Without missing a beat Arty marched over to the couch, bodily heaved up the middle cushion as Brit squirmed and squeaked in protest, deposited the mobile device under said cushion and let it fall back down with a huff.

She marched back to the kitchen to finish her work.

* * *

Tony was well aware he was being—what did the kids these days call it?—oh yes, creepy.

It wasn’t his intent, far from it, but here he was.

Standing hiding behind a thick tree that bordered one of the grassy clearings in Central Park, tinted glasses on and hood up as he waited for JARVIS to give the signal, Tony was at his wits end.

He was running out of ideas, and before he went to Plan B he needed to be sure Ocean Eyes had been getting his messages to begin with.

“Where’re we at, JAY?”

“*Coming into an Ardha Chandrasana pose, otherwise known as a Half Moon Pose, now, Sir.*”

Like Tony knew what the hell that meant. “Translation?”

“They are still standing, Sir.”

Tony sighed and fidgeted, tapping a finger on the wood as he stared up into the canopy. The 10am sun pierced through the blanket of leaves, dappling the earth with a rolling lightshow as the breeze danced through the grove he occupied. Two or three people had passed through it already but they paid him no mind as he kept his head down and back turned, pretending to lean against the trunk and fiddle with his phone.

“How long does yoga take?” He murmured under his breath, not wanting to gain attention as the crazy man talking to himself. The absolute last thing he needed was to draw a crowd and blow his cover—it would’ve been smarter to stay in the Tower and just have JAY relay what he was after but he’d wanted to see her response in person.

“*Indeterminable—the answer varies depending on style used, repetitions completed, and experience of the practitioner. One might also consider whether it is a group-based session, or being done solely by an individual.*”

Tony had to fight not to roll his eyes. The question had been semi-rhetorical; he was just passing the time.

In the clearing JAY was monitoring, a dozen or so people were assembled for a casual morning yoga session, whoever happened to drop by or have the time to get in a little stretch. Having stopped and joined the gathering after their “usual” morning jog, Ocean Eyes and Big Red were among them. He said “usual” because that’s what JAY said—according to the AI, the two tended to go for a run in the park every Tuesday and Thursday morning, always finishing their routine with a brief stretch. Tony wasn’t sure which city cameras JAY was taking advantage of or for how long his most evolved son had been masquerading as a voyeur, but the billionaire certainly hadn’t asked him to do it.

If anything JARVIS was the creepy one and had taken ruthless advantage of Tony when the creator
was at a low point. They’d have to work on that.

“While we wait, Sir, might I suggest contacting the Mayor? He is, as one might say, still miffed about the meeting you cancelled. His secretary is also still leaving messages with—”

“Not now, JAY. Put something in the books, I’ll deal with it then.” While normally his penchant for multi-tasking was unparalleled, meeting with the mayor was so far down on his list of priorities he couldn’t be bothered.

“…As you wish, Sir.”

In the silence Tony fiddled with his phone, double-checking he had his latest attempt to get a response ready to go. Even yesterdays painstakingly crafted ransom note, for which he’d had to scavenge the business floors for magazines to use, hadn’t done the trick. Tony’d had a really awkward encounter with Thomas Pritchard because of said scavenging hunt, the balding man making accidental eye contact with him while refilling his coffee; Pritchard had sipped at his drink quickly and moved on, avoiding Tony’s stern look as neither of them brought up the fact he’d watched his boss bodily tackle a girl to the floor. But they were both thinking it.

Anyway, he’d had to endure that encounter and still received nothing in return. He’d begun to wonder if she was getting the messages at all. The likelihood was that she absolutely was and was just ignoring him but Tony wanted to be certain.

This last picture was his Hail Mary—if it didn’t get a response he’d just have to pursue another avenue for her attention.

He was rather proud of this one, if he said so himself: her sneaker was chilling on top of a shelf next to DUM-E, overseeing his good work as the bot tinkered with spare parts on a workstation. A fuchsia-colored drink was next to Leftie on the shelf and a boldly patterned straw umbrella was in the glass to complete the picture. No words this time, but the intent was clear. Leftie had overcome captivity and was living the life.

“I believe we are a go, Sir. They are going into Balasana, or Child’s Pose, now. Her mobile device is within reach.”

Finally.

Tony turned and extended his sight around the tree, aiming for a clear view so he could see his Mates reaction.

He’d had yet to actually see her, just had JAY direct him to the optimal spot for his purpose, but now he couldn’t deny the rush of expectation, skin around the arc reactor tightening slightly. The last glimpse he’d gotten of Ocean Eyes was her deer-in-headlights impression as she backed up into that elevator and he was rather eager to have that one replaced.

The group was just easing into the grounded pose as JAY said, heads and torsos bowing over, but he could pick her out like a beacon. Out in the open the sun lit her hair like a bonfire, throwing her lowered crown into sharp relief with the dark blue hoodie and black leggings she wore. Big Red’s fiery mane next to her only served as confirmation.

Palms flat to the grass like everyone else, Tony could just barely make out the glinted reflection of her phone mere inches from her fingertips.

Gripped with single-minded intensity, Tony hit send.
It took a few moments before the alert tone he presumed went off seemed to reach her. With great trepidation Tony watched as she stirred, lifting her head to angle toward her device as her hand reached for it in turn, hair falling around her like a wave.

Ocean Eyes looked at the screen.

A moment later she set it down sharply, flipping it screen-side down as she did.

Tony resisted the urge to bang his head against the trunk.

_Goddamnit._

He could practically hear Pepper now: ‘What, your Soulmate’s capable of resisting the charms of the great Tony Stark? Sounds more like my Soulmate.’

But even as he keened inside he couldn’t miss the slight pinch of her nose and the fascinating way her mouth was twitching, as though she were trying valiantly not to laugh.

And when she sat up fully, rest of the group following in their own sweet time, he didn’t fail to notice the purposeful way she scrunched her face, trying to wipe away any trace of her amusement, didn’t fail to notice the little huff of her shoulders as she balanced on her heels and pulled her hair into a loose bun.

While she looked at the phone like a conundrum, Tony looked at her, assigning that little nose scrunch to a storage vault of ‘Yes, Where Do I Sign Up To See That Again’.

What an expression.

Now that she was up, clothing straightened and arms hanging loosely at her sides, Tony could read the gold writing on her hoodie.

… _Interesting._

Berkeley, huh?

He filed that away for later.

The group was slowly dispersing and Big Red was moving next to her, back mostly to him as she folded her legs into a crossed position and said something to her companion. Tony could only watch as the blonde shook her head and indicated the device, still resting innocently in the grass, with her head. A somewhat animated conversation seemed to follow between the two, though mostly one-sided, and culminated with the redhead resting a gentle yet fixed hand on his Mate’s shoulder.

They stayed that way for a minute in silence before the taller of the two stood up, grabbing the empty water bottle at her feet and gesturing to the drinking fountain near the other side of the clearing.

Ocean Eyes nodded, and was left alone to track the momentum of the clouds.

She was still—probably the only thing in that particular clearing that was, joggers and dog walkers and kids kicking around balls in the area behind her.

Tony would’ve given his kidney to know what she was thinking.

But whatever it was, her face did not betray her thoughts, all emotion smoothed from the surface as she simply sat.
Unmoving.

Wait.

Wait, wait, wait a minute.

Was she…?

She was.

‘Houston, we have movement,’ Tony thought triumphantly.

Ocean Eyes was picking up her phone. She flipped it over, unlocked the screen. Stared at the message. Sighed and looked at the clouds, squinting in the light of the sun. She looked back at the message.

Her fingers were twitching…then her thumb started to move, ever so slowly, as if reaching for the keyboard—

A whirling ball of fur exploded into view and knocked the phone from her hand.

Tail wagging like a cyclone, the dog was on her like her UC sweater was made of steak, licking at her face and pawing at the ground around her knees in excitement. Its leash was limp and human-less in the grass.

With a smile reminiscent of the one she’d first displayed back at the tower, the girl enthusiastically obliged, mouth moving in what was clearly supposed to be a string of “hello there’s” and “yes’s” and “who’s a good boy” as she scratched the Shepherd behind the ears; when the canine managed to overcome it’s burst of energy and flop over onto its back she indulged it then, too, giving what he was sure was a Class A tummy-rub.

The tail kept on wagging, and his Mate kept on smiling.

And the billionaire stood there in incredulity, watching as her phone was discarded, forgotten in favor of belly rubs.

You know—Tony’d never had a dog on his Shit List before.

Never.

There was, however, a first time for everything.

Not that he thought it was possible, but it got even worse when the owner finally caught up to his runaway beast—beast whose tongue had flopped unceremoniously out of its mouth—and started chatting with the blonde.

Tony knew flirting when he saw it: the puffed out chest, the broad stance, the carefully measured smile; this guy was going for broke. His standard good looks and athletic build probably got him plenty of attention.

Tony barely had a chance to think an unpleasant thought about the civilian before he’d noticed Ocean Eyes seemed either completely oblivious or was playing oblivious as she said something polite, gave the dog one last pat on the head, and pocketed her phone to take off in the direction of Big Red, meeting the redhead halfway as she returned with the water.

The two girls left the clearing, and the dejected dog-owner walked away with a pout.
Tony couldn’t help feeling a little pleased.

“Not the reaction we were hoping for, I believe?” JARVIS said into his ear.

Tony sighed. No. Despite the fact he now knew that she was getting the messages, and despite the small comfort she didn’t seem to hate them through and through, it still was not the reaction they were hoping for.

“Negative, JAY-man. Time for Plan B.”

“Ah, the direct approach.”

Tony pocketed his phone and turned to go now that both girls were well out of sight. Yeah, the direct approach.

More the sideways approach, anyways.

Today was a bust, but tomorrow...

* * *

“—doing really well. She’s glad to be out for now but I don’t think that’ll last before she gets bored. ‘M thinking of signing her up for some kind of art or science program or something. Maybe a soccer team. Whadda you think?’”

Arty started, struggling to fold herself back into the conversation and away from the crowds. “Sorry, say that last bit again?”

A small sigh from the other end. “I said I’m thinking of signing Elsie up for some kind of summer program, help keep her from getting too bored and running amuck, that sort of thing,” her sister repeated. “Think she’s too young or nah?”

Arty rubbed at her temple, thinking. “Nah, she’s seven. Just don’t go too overboard—you don’t want her to burn out before she reaches second grade,” she paused, “something nice and mild that feeds her monkey-brain of creativity should do.”

Sandra hummed, sound barely audible. The honking cars and chaotic humdrum of passerby’s was rather distracting from Arty’s place on the public library steps as she took a little breather. The hustle and bustle wasn’t nearly as distracting as the tip of Stark Tower she spied between the buildings in front of her.

Pulling up her legs onto a higher step, she turned so she wasn’t looking at it.

It seemed no matter where she went the tower was visible. She couldn’t go to the damn market, she couldn’t go to JT’s for her shifts, she couldn’t even go on a run without seeing the thing, she turned around to take a breath and there it wa—

“HEY. EARTH TO ARTY.”

She fought not to jerk the phone from her ear. “Hmm? Sorry, sorry.”

“…you sure you’re feeling better?”

Arty paused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you haven’t heard almost a single thing I’ve said. Flu shouldn’t have hung around this
**long, are you sure you’re okay?**

Ah, right, she’d had the “flu”. Arty could feel the source of her malady looming to the side as if it was boring holes into her person.

Yeah, she was totally over it. “Perfectly fine,” she lied.

“If you say so,” Sandra said, voice muffled as she covered the phone to yell what sounded like a warning to someone on the other end. Probably her other niece. Her sister returned in record time. “Anyways, how’s New York? I know you weren’t so hot on it last time we spoke. Anything interesting happen since then? Aliens not included.”

Ha.

Hahahahahahaha. Ha.

“Not a damn thing,” she lied again. Arty wasn’t about to be responsible for sending the whole family into chaos. She wasn’t about to be responsible for breaking the paper-thin peace that had finally resettled.

Arty changed the subject. “Have you heard from Leah recently? I texted her back a while ago but no response.”

“Still somewhere in Europe, though where I don’t know,” Sandra said of their other sister. “Last she told me she was off for Luxembourg…or was it Lichtenstein? Beats me.”

That sounded like Leah—still thrill seeking, still using any excuse to avoid home.

Arty took a deep breath before asking the next question. “How’s mom?”

A long moment of silence. “Well, you know. Some days are better than others…I think the new meds are helping a little, and I think the dog’s doing a world of good.”

“Okay.” She couldn’t summon another response.

“Yeah…listen, I gotta’ go. Chloe’s giving me attitude.”

Arty could hear said attitude on the other end, something about her eldest niece being allowed to do whatever she wanted. That Age. “No problem. Give the girls a hug for me.”

“Will do, love you.”

“Love you, too.” The line clicked.

Arty took a deep breath and stood up, facing the tower head on. She stared at it, turning the phone idly in her hand and biting her lip in thought. She hadn’t received a text this morning and it was almost noon.

She definitely felt some type of way about that but she was having a hard time pinning down what… which was why she’d gone running this morning.

Running was not her preferred method of exercise—hiking was her favorite—but the only things to hike in New York were stairs. Running as a last resort was better than nothing and it helped clear her mind, put things into focus. She knew Brit had a class at noon today so Arty had struck out on her own, intent on going through her list of Things She’d Put Off Dealing With Because That’s Just Unhealthy and intent on the exercise bolstering her energy to do so.
So far she’d been very productive: she’d talked to Laurent to brainstorm potential new articles on the horizon; she’d popped by JT’s, even though at this time the bar wasn’t even open, and went over some numbers with him they hadn’t had the time for during her last shift; and she’d semi-dealt with the family issue. Arty was feeling better and more like herself with every passing day but she still didn’t think she could handle a conversation with her mom. She’d just have to let Sandra pass on the news she was alive and well with nothing interesting at all having happened to her.

And she’d finally, finally talked to Jimmy.

They’d been playing phone tag for days now, but Arty’d called him on a whim this morning and received a stern, but expected earful of: “Damnit girl, don’t worry me like that.”

Arty let him rant for only so long before she jumped in, lest he burst a vessel, to let him know that yes, they had changed and upgraded the locks, and yes, they had programmed the number to the closest precinct into their phones, and yes, they had bought a bat and a chair the perfect height to budge under the bedroom handle in case someone made it past the front door, and yes, they knew not to go messing with anything extraterrestrial in origin, and yes, she absolutely positively did promise to call if she needed anything whatsoever.

He had wanted the names of their neighbors as well to check for any violent criminal histories but boy did Arty have to draw the line somewhere.

Pfft. Cops.

Jimmy was always a worrier when it came to her, now more than ever that she was a whole continent away, but she appreciated the concern.

But now that all second and tertiary concerns were behind her, she was left with the big, fat, skyscraper-sized Gordian knot called STARK.

Arty’s eyes traced the A of the man’s name; it was still visible at the top of his tower. She followed the slope of the bold, moonlight blue letter (idly wondering if he had plans to restore the rest of his name) toward the long helipad jutting out near the top of the building, along the curve of the endless glass windows toward the sky and up. Up where he’d flown to his death, and only by sheer luck survived.

She drew another shaky breath, fighting the involuntary hardening of her jaw and working to loosen the muscles of her clenched neck.

Knowing it would help, Arty took off at a light jog, making her way back to the apartment and embracing the higher cognizance the exercise gave her.

‘Dear god, not you.’

Arty tried not to wince, focusing on her pace. What an awful thing to say.

The words had just sort of slipped out and she hadn’t really processed that was what she’d said until last night. They’d been said in panic, but they hadn’t necessarily been wrong, either.

Of all the people...of all the people.

Arty wasn’t cold, nor was she harsh by nature. Give her a dime for every one of her faults and she’d gladly lay them out for display: petty, stubborn, and occasionally vindictive were among them, but not cruelty. She wasn’t without empathy and she wasn’t blind to the needs of others—Johnni would even say her capacity for love was a branch of her problem.
It just had to be him.

His face swam to the forefront of her mind, haunting her. Tony Stark. Her Soulmate. For all of ten seconds he’d looked just like the public (and her) had always seen him—charismatic, ridiculously and unfairly good-looking, utterly disarming—while he’d taken her hand in his and flashed her a smile Arty would deny made her a little weak in the knees. Then his expression had changed, as was the norm when two souls crossed that Uncanny Bridge toward a new state of being. It wasn’t an expression she could put a name to, certainly wasn’t one she’d ever had directed at her, and it wasn’t one she’d ever seen him don in his public appearances.

It had been so…intimate. Arty felt, in retrospect, she’d glimpsed a piece of his soul there, seen past his established façade into a place never before touched by human eyes. For a man so built around his many public personas, she doubted such an intrusion by a nobody was welcome.

But she’d seen it, was just now remembering the way his grip on her hand had tightened as he somehow knew she was going to run, was remembering the way he’d looked as the elevator doors shut between them, deep brown eyes awash with every question he hadn’t asked—

And he was falling from the sky again, motionless. Dead by all appearances. Would’ve been dead if it weren’t for his giant green friend.

Her jog turned to a run.

Nope, nope, nope. No thank you.

Arty kept at her pace for a good ten minutes, sweat beading along her hairline and down the small of her back as her baggy sweatshirt became more of a nuisance. She stopped briefly at a crosswalk, waiting for the light to change and checking her phone when it buzzed in her hands.

A text from Brit: ‘btw don’t grab the bat.

Don’t grab the—what now?

Arty replied, scrunching her face in confusion: ‘?’

The response was swift, with no clarification whatsoever: ‘just don’t grab it, k?’

Uh-huh, sure.

Arty shook her head, bouncing on her feet as she eyed the WALK sign.

She was off like a rocket when it changed, wishing for water whilst simultaneously enjoying the burn sprouting in her legs and lugs. Arty would’ve found the Black Market herself and traded an organ if it meant she could have back the rolling green comfort of the Santa Teresa Hills and the Santa Cruz Mountains, but oh well. Hiking this wasn’t, but it hit the spot.

The apartment came up faster than she would’ve liked and Arty considered taking another lap; the idea had merit compared to being confined in the tiny apartment space where there was no room to think and everything was claustrophobic, but the shaking of her hands was telling her she needed to eat.

At least the smell from the alien whale carcass was dying off. She might even be able to crack a window, feel less like a prisoner.

Arty sighed as she reached their building entrance, distraction over, pulling out her keys and holding
the door open for an elderly gentleman making his way out. She stopped to help him down the three stairs as well, steady but gentle grip on his arm as he thanked her, calling her a nice girl and a lovely girl and very well mannered.

Truthfully, Arty felt anything but as she thought of the eight unanswered messages still hiding in her phone and the terrible words she’d said to him, condemning him to live with the phrase on his skin his entire life.

She got the man into a cab and retreated back inside, taking the stairs two at a time to their third floor residence as she contemplated just what kind of effect her words might’ve had on her Mate. Somewhere in there she was also deeply curious where said words had manifested: it was something of a game for some members of the worldwide population to figure out celebrities’ Soulmarks—there were entire sites and subgroups of paparazzi dedicated to the “art”. It was a disgusting practice, but one that was ingrained in the fabric of society. It also wasn’t a secret that many who counted themselves among the famous and desirable often took to covering their marks with makeup and other Hollywood movie magic.

Not that it would be any consolation to the words themselves but Arty hoped, at the very least, they were somewhere easily hidden, if only to have spared him the time and energy of hiding them.

If she could firmly grasp one thought on her perspective of this whole debacle, it was that.

Which brought her back to feeling a whole slew of things as she thrust her key into the lock and stepped into the apartment. Closing the door, she pressed her forehead against the cool wood and exhaled.

Thinking of his face had been a bad idea. Thinking of what her words might have put him through was even worse.

What was she supposed to do now?

Arty pushed away from the door and shook off the thought, along with her sweatshirt, tossing the navy blue thing in the direction of the couch as she made her way to the cupboard-slash-air pocket they called a kitchen.

It was something she wanted to talk to Brit about when she got home, see if she could use her as a sounding board for her turbulent thoughts.

But for now, water. Sweet nectar of the Earth.

She grabbed a mug from the cupboard, frowning when she couldn’t find her favorite, and set to filling it from the tap.

Arty would give her brain a rest, plop down with a movie and her laptop and maybe check out the news about that temple they’d just discovered in Peru. Laurent had been ecstatic to tell her about it.

She turned off the faucet and took a long drink. Mm-mm. Taking another sip, Arty toed off her shoes before heading toward to the living room.

Or maybe she’d look over the new clean energy project they were trying to implement in the school districts back home? Seemed interesting.

Arty turned the corner…

…and choked on her water.
Tony Stark was sitting on her couch.

Tony Stark.

Sitting.

On her couch.

Well, not quite. The man was more perched on its arm if anything, feet flat on the ground and elbows resting on his knees as he leant forward, facing her.

Arty blinked rapidly.

The tears from gasping around her water were messing with her vision, yes?

Yes.

She turned on her heel and left the room.

Stupid tears, out here causing hallucinations.

Arty gave herself a five count and walked back into the room.

He was still there.

She looked at the bookshelf, then back to the couch.

Nope, still there—this time with a cocked brow.

She looked at the TV, back to the couch.

Present and accounted for.

Oh.

...Fuck.

Arty’s mind ground to a halt, hit reverse, and backed up into a wall.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Eyes fastened to her like a lodestone and back straightening slowly, Tony Stark withdrew from his slouched position to hold his hands out and to the side: a placating gesture clearly meant to soothe and also to say, ‘Hey, I’m here, don’t throw something at me please.’ Clutched loosely in one of his surrendering hands was Leftie, cage-free and sole intact.

A pregnant silence blanketed the space between them.

Fuck.

Poker face donned, so distinctly different from the last time she’d seen him, her Mate opened his mouth…then snapped it shut again as the quiet bloomed larger.

Was he waiting for her to go first?

Fat chance: she was already counting the steps it would take to reach the door and avoid this all together.
But unlike their first encounter, Arty didn’t move. Something inside of her, probably that dumbass part responsible for pride, kept her rooted to the spot. Panic and dread may have been vying for the top spot in her mental food chain but she didn’t budge. Not an inch.

She watched him, and waited. She wouldn’t run, but she wouldn’t go first either.

Unspoken agreement having settled in the air, her Mate gave an almost imperceptible nod and opened his mouth again.

Fuck.

“So here’s the thing,” he began, inching to his feet but keeping his distance, “You’re getting all my best stuff here—my A Game, my Sistine Chapel, my Cream of the Crop.

“But,” he stressed, “even I, genius though I am”—and here he stopped to gesture oh-so-humbly at the grandness that was himself—“can not maintain this kind of high-quality indefinitely and, quite frankly, I think you’re doing yourself dirty if you force me to fall back on my more pathetic material.” He looked at her pointedly, eyes boring into her soul as he examined her face for any hint of cracking. “A great disservice to us both, really. How’ll I look myself in the tabloids anymore?”

Arty felt the muscles around her mouth twitch. ‘No,’ that voice inside reprimanded.

Tony Stark seemed to note the game playing around her lips with fascination as he waited for a response.

She didn’t have one. Well, she did, but the voice of self-preservation wouldn’t let her say it.

“How’d you get in?” Arty said instead, registering how muted her voice sounded as she eyed the living room window behind him. The idea of Tony Stark crawling up the fire escape was comical, if irrelevant.

Similar to how he’d gotten her phone number, she supposed the answer didn’t matter—it was a pretty run down neighborhood, low safety measures and even lower standards for door locks, Jimmy’s advice notwithstanding. If Tony Stark could build a flying suit with weapons out the wazoo, he could pick a lock.

But Arty knew the answer before he even had to give it—the question had simply been to avoid his own.

She could see the man file away her evasion with a hint of disappointment, but he didn’t comment on it.

“You friend,” he confirmed, voice noticeably softer. He probably should’ve led with that. “Brittany, right? She let me in, said to tell you about the Bee’s Knees and the Cat’s Elbows—or something along the lines of animal appendages—and that you’d know what that meant.”

Our safe words.

Arty closed her eyes in half-annoyance, half-defeat, as the redhead’s text swam before her lids: ‘don’t grab the bat’.

Translation: Don’t take a swing at one of the nations treasures and damage him because I let him stay and just didn’t wanna’ tell you cuz then you’d’ve never come home.

‘Jesus Christ, Brit,’ she groaned internally. ‘Why would you do this to me?’
Arty inhaled deeply to steady herself.

He was here and so was she.

And despite the physical urge to pull a Forrest Gump and just book it for the West Coast, she didn’t want to run.

She took another shaky breath and opened her eyes.

Armed to the teeth with the deepest brown eyes Arty’d ever seen in her life, he was watching her like a hawk. Respecting her time to process his Brit-allied-intrusion but inspecting her as she did, his gaze held all the significant weight of a twenty-ton missile and was just as penetrating.

She’d noticed the eyes that first meeting in Thomas Pritchard’s office—before everything went topsy-turvy. Intense and guarded, smoldering and charged with the power to make any grown-ass individual trip over themselves, she’d noticed them. Had even felt a little gooey inside, same as she was sure anyone who’d ever been within a mile radius of him had.

But that’d been Tony Stark the Flirtatious Billionaire.

This was Tony Stark the Soulmate.

Arty felt a tingle run up her spine.

Suddenly the idea that she’d doubted his presence in in their apartment to begin with, in favor of some weird, subconsciously birthed hallucination, was ludicrous.

L-U-D-I-C-R-O-U-S.

Tony Stark was as out of place in their shoebox hovel as a glacier in a desert.

His jeans and simple black long sleeve shirt, tailored though they were, might’ve made any other man melt into the surroundings as if he belonged—and for all Arty knew that might’ve been his intent, to emit an air of normalcy—but he wasn’t any other man.

Superhero extraordinaire, Tony Stark was as conspicuous as they came.

You could take a supernova and dress it like a human, but a supernova was still a supernova and no amount of camouflage could mask its brilliance.

Another tingle up her spine.

On second thought, running sounded great.

Who hadn’t wanted to pull a Forrest at some point in their life? Arty was ridiculously fast by nature, but the man before her had longer legs and if they were going to go for Football Tackle 2.0 he would probably win before she unlocked the door.

She was just pondering the efficacy of launching herself out the kitchen window instead when she spied the coffee table, and the familiar yellow of her favorite mu—

Her mouth fell open. “That’s my mug,” she said stupidly, disbelief taking center stage. “Who said you could use it?”

The man arched a brow, following her ire to the half-full ceramic cup.
“—and, hey, are those my cookies?” Arty zeroed in on said plate of cookies, the dish hopelessly, pathetically, bare. There was one left. One. Judging by the amount of crumbs left behind, the whole box had met its doom. She looked back at him, could feel her eyes narrowing as betrayal filled her heart.

All thoughts of running vanished.

First Brit had let him in…and let him stay. Without warning.

Second, her friend had made him—what was that, tea? She’d made him tea. In her happy mug.

And now, of all things, of all the daggers to the heart and knives in the back, Brit had given him her Dark Chocolate Peppermint Joe Joe’s?!

Brit was as good as dead when she got home.

“I was saving those—they’re seasonal!”

*

Well.

This was a rather bizarre turn of events.

Not unwelcome, just bizarre.

Tony’d wondered why the redhead had looked so self-satisfied when she popped open the cookie box and shaken them with glee onto a plate.

Now, seeing his Mate’s reaction, he understood.

‘Take it up with the Lady of the House,’ he thought defensively, ‘she ate most of them herself.’

And she really had. Big Red had looked smug and amused from here to Timbuktu as she consumed one cookie after the other, as though audience to a joke only she could hear.

Joke was on him, he guessed. Or on the girl across from him.

Either way, this wasn’t how he’d seen the day going.

This hadn’t been “the plan”.

The plan, if he could call it that, had simply been to return the sneaker as a sign of good faith, maybe earn him some points, and to catch Big Red alone. Back at the tower she’d seemed to genuinely appraise him; in the two weeks since, she’d stuck by his Mates side and not run to the gossip sites for a quick paycheck and ten seconds of fame.

As far as he was concerned, and with a shocking lack of other resources, she was his in: if Tony played his cards right, he might be able to get the redhead to take pity on him and a) provide insight as to why he’d been left feeling like the Big Bad Wolf and b) give him some insider tips on how to proceed from here.

His current avenue of pursuit clearly wasn’t working and he was in the market for a new strategy.

Ergo, best friend.
To say Tony’s hope had been bolstered when Big Red didn’t even look surprised to see him standing outside their door was an understatement.

She hadn’t been surprised and she hadn’t felt the need to fill the moment with unnecessary small talk, either. The redhead had simply taken him in, clocking the kidnapped sneaker, and opened the door wide, gesturing inside. He’d followed without a word.

They hadn’t played the game of “why are you here” and “what can I do for you”.

Instead she’d offered Tony a seat (which he courteously declined), offered him some tea (which he also declined but she’d set about making anyways, a move he theorized was to buy time to think of how she was going to deal with, well, him), and then got right to the punch.

Pulling him away from the framed photo’s and books he’d been filing away for dissection perusing while she made said tea, she’d said: “It’s not personal.”

Tony was at a loss for how, in any world, he was supposed to see Ocean Eyes’ 1,000 Meter Dash as anything but personal, but he’d digressed. He’d simply accepted the steaming mug and stamped out any quippy remark that sprung to mind.

If he wanted this lady as his ally he had to avoid being himself for as long as possible. Hard ask, but if it got him answers he would sew his mouth shut himself.

But Tony hadn’t received his answers in any regard. The redhead had given him a nonnegotiable face of ‘It’s not my place to say’ when she felt him straying that direction and left it at that. But she hadn’t kicked him out—a good sign.

So.

“Suggestions?” he’d asked. There was no point in beating around the bush. Tony was a man on a mission and he didn’t intend to go home empty handed.

Big Red—Brittany, she’d said her name was—hadn’t given him any of those either.

She’d sized him up instead: looked him up and down, side to side, backwards and forwards as though he were the first multicellular organism to be put under a microscope; she’d looked out the window, listening to the sound of aggravated New York life as she visibly weighed the pro’s and con’s of a solution she refused to specify; and she’d held his gaze for what felt an eternity after that, engaging him in some sort of internal battle he didn’t know the rules of. Tony hadn’t backed down.

The willowy human had shocked the absolute hell out of him when she’d seemed to come to a conclusion, nodding to herself with resolute eyes, and said:

“She’ll be home in an hour.”

Then she’d pushed away from the kitchen doorframe and gone about getting ready to leave, grabbing her coat and ignoring the way he’d frozen still as she eased on a pair of slip-ons.

Some less intelligible version of “Uhhgm” had been his only thought to vocalize.

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” she’d said, apparently a master at gibberish. “Because I say so. Also”—and here she’d stopped to rummage through what was presumably not her own room, returning with a striped box held aloft like a golden egg—“she won’t run this time.”

The redhead had rustled the whole box onto a plate, eating as many as she stuffed into a Ziploc for
later consumption, mentioned the whole thing about insect and feline joints and finished with the old adage of “If she takes a swing at you, duck.”

Then she’d grabbed a duffel bag near the entrance, ignored his half-formed words of protest, and left.

Left him standing there with a mug of chamomile in one hand and quandary of ethics in the other.

He hadn’t wanted to scare his Mate. Or make her feel cornered. That was the entire reason he’d come to her friend to begin with.

‘Help Me, Even Though I’d Never Use The Word Help, Navigate This Ostensible Minefield’ had been the goal, not ‘By All Means, Leave Me Unarmed As Another Rejection Goes Straight For My Jugular’.

Tony’d been prepared to leave no less than five times, making it to the door and touching the brass knob every one of them.

He’d hesitated no less than five times, too.

The redhead had been insistent, despite her clear soul-searching in becoming so, and had not been forthcoming with any alternatives, had she not? He’d gotten the distinct impression this was her alternative. Rip off the proverbial band-aid, as it were.

And Tony was tired. So, so tired. Tired of those haunting eyes tearing him from sleep, tired of hearing over and over again that she didn’t want him as her words rang in his skull like the damn thing was an echo chamber, tired of remembering how satisfyingly fitting her hand had been, so warm and soft, incased in his own scarred, mechanics hands…before she ripped it away in the flight of her life.

He was tired of wondering—he’d been wondering and agonizing his entire damn life.

Morals—and his own trembling hands—aside, it came down to whether or not he trusted the redhead’s judgment.

An extraneous matter.

But the framed photos of the two girls, the fact they lived together, the comforting hand she’d rested on the girls shoulder the day before in the park…Ocean Eyes trusted her.

And Ocean Eyes was his Soulmate, so…

So in lieu of leaving, Tony’d done his best to make himself as non-threatening as possible.

He’d positioned himself just so on the edge of the couch, in clear sight but far enough from the door that she wouldn’t feel trapped. The sneaker he’d kept in his hand, a visible peace offering to break the ice.

Then he waited, too worried to move and examine the rest of the photos in the living room in case she came home.

His setup had been perfect.

Then his Mate had returned, and, before he summoned the words to announce his presence, had promptly thrown her sweatshirt at his head.

The face full of Berkeley had also not been on the docket for the day. Tony’d been more than a little
too shocked to speak up once she’d left the room, just blinked dazedly at the college paraphernalia before setting it onto the couch proper and hearing the water run.

When the moment of truth finally came, in exactly the way he’d gone to such lengths to avoid, the reaction had been…exactly what he’d feared.

Eye’s big as saucers, scanning the path to the door like her very survival depended on it, his Mate had been terrified and he’d been guilty.

‘Dear god, not you.’

‘Thanks Red,’ Tony had thought miserably. ‘Just what the doctor ordered.’

But Ocean Eyes hadn’t run.

She hadn’t run, and the same little mouth twitch-slash-nose scrunch she’d done the other day wiped nearly all logic from his mind—had he said something that got that reaction? He didn’t remember, could only register the existence of present nose scrunch. Then she’d asked him something, his answer coming out in autopilot because…she’d spoken to him.

She’d spoken to him, yes? Not his imagination?

Now that was what he called progress.

With great suddenness, Tony came back into himself to register his Mate was all of a sudden angry.

Why was she angry again?

Oh, right

Cookies.

All in all, this day had taken a wild turn. And despite feeling like the redhead had left him woefully unprepared for this encounter, he thought that maybe—just maybe—she’d known what she was doing with those cookies.

Tony did the only thing he could think of.

Grabbing the plate, he held it out between them, lone cookie offered up as tribute.

“Parley?”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Tony digs for answers and Brit has some explaining to do.
My deepest apologies for this being a day late. Things at work got kind of crazy and I wasn't able to get home till much later than normal and I was running on like 4 hours of sleep and way too much caffeine that my body's not used to-- I even stayed up like three hours past when I normally nod off, trying to edit this to get it out on time, but it just wasn't happening. I hope Monday is acceptable!

But to every single lovely person who's reading and subscribing and kudoing and especially commenting (love you guys!), THANK YOU SO MUCH <3 You guys continue to make my days, my weeks, my life, and I can't thank you enough for it. The response to this story has been amazing!

Hovering between them and being a fine representative of delicious peace offerings, the dark chocolate treat was bathed in sun from the open window as the planet slowed its rotation.

The room was still.

His Mate frowned at the proffered cookie, looked to Tony, and frowned at him to. Her face was fraught with agitation, mouth moving with a million things to say yet none of them broaching the silence.

Tony stood firm as the seconds-turned-minutes ticked by, arm never wavering as the chocolate coating began to melt.

‘This is why I do it,’ he thought with grim amusement. All the gym hours with Happy, all the cardio and weights and MMA training—it was all so he could hold one plate, with one cookie, and not look like a dunce in front of his Soulmate by letting them waver.

Looking for the entire world like his offer was a booby-trapped crossroads, where one path led to Extreme Misfortune and the other also led to Extreme Misfortune But With A Side Of Chocolate, she frowned between cookie and billionaire like she was stuck in no-mans land. As though taking the cookie were a sign of weakness and faltering agency she couldn’t surrender.

In the end, she just couldn’t do it.

Back straightening and feet firm, his Mate crossed her arms defensively and narrowed her eyes at him.

Challenging.

That was fine. Tony was never one to let a challenge go unanswered, and the action just served to make him scribble ‘prideful’ on a mental slip of paper and drop it into the box he’d labeled ‘Mate Who Hates Me’.

Another bit of vital information locked away, Tony wracked his brain for something witty to save face in light of her rejection. Coming up blank, he fell back on the only thing he could, the same
thing that’d led to his offer of truce in the first place.

When in doubt: instinct good.

Narrowing his own eyes in provocation, Tony took the cookie, raised it to his mouth and, never breaking eye contact, devoured it whole.

Somewhere under the earth, JARVIS’s namesake was rolling in his grave and banging his head against his coffin.

…Tony’s instincts were not great.

Utter disbelief written in every line of her body, Ocean Eyes’ arms fell loosely to her sides, strings severed, and her mouth gaped like some oceanic creature from the depths. She stared dejectedly at the cookies last resting place, skin around her eyes twitching something fierce, before turning her incredulity towards its executioner.

She glared at him.

Well. He’d already climbed this hill—might as well die on it, too.

Licking the chocolate residue from his fingers with operatic relish and maintaining her gaze all the while, Tony wiped his hands with finality and declared:

“Mm-mm—now I’m not much of a chocolate guy, but man did that hit the spot.”

It was actually her face that hit the spot: every trace of skin betrayed what she thought of his wicked act.

The audacity.

The daring.

The chutzpah.

The murder.

“Y-You,” she stuttered, “You did not just—”

“Sure did.” The sly grin making its way onto his face was second nature as the color rose on hers.

“You come into my house, you eat my cookies—”

“—delicious cookies, if I might add. The chocolate was pretty basic but the mint really took it to the next level.”

Tony’s Mate may have had her own line of defenses, but bravado and grandstanding were his. Feeling himself build up momentum to prepare for the coming siege, he took a small, half step to the right. Tony was far better at keeping himself going when he wasn’t glued to the floor.

“How dare you—“

“I dared. Though if you’re looking to file a complaint, you’ll have to leave a message—business hours are closed.”

Ocean Eyes raised both hands in a stop-everything gesture, eyes wide and losing focus between the
floor, the ceiling, and Tony himself. She was shaking her head, trying to reorient herself and wrap her mind around just how they’d gotten here.

Good. Slightly underhanded though it was to take advantage of her puzzlement, this was probably the best in he was going to get.

Tony steeled his resolve.

He had this. He was Iron Man—he had faced down terrorists and aliens and gods.

He had this.

Tapping his index and middle fingers dramatically against his temple as if the thought had only just occurred to him, he proclaimed, “Oh! Where are my manners? I’m Tony, by the way, Tony Stark—maybe you’ve heard of me.” Her eyes zeroed in on him, suddenly suspicious. “I would’ve preferred to introduce myself properly the first time around, momentous occasion that it was, but you seemed a little busy, you know, running.”

There it was again—that little eye flicker towards the door. But she didn’t budge, nor did she take up the invitation.

Tony took another half step to the right, on a roll now. “Not what I expected, by the way,” he said, maybe a little too quickly and maybe a little less strong than he would’ve liked. But if he didn’t jump this hurdle now he might lose his nerve. “The running, I mean. One never can predict these things, but I will admit I expected something marginally less exsanguinating than the hit-and-run you dealt.”

‘Feel free to jump in any time,’ he thought desperately. ‘I can’t do all the work.’

And jump in she did.

Her mouth twitched as she huffed and countered, “Look who’s talking. I just did the running—that body slam was all you.”

Tony winced. “Touché…and for that, I apologize.”

Ocean Eyes shifted a little on her feet. “…Apology accepted. Now, if we’re done here, I’ll just take my shoe and you can my on your merry way—”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Were we on a subject?” She feigned innocence, but her shoulders were rigidly set. “I can’t recall.”

“Why did you run?”

“…I had an appointment.”

“Why did you run?” Tony repeated.

“Why’d you steal my shoe?”

“I asked you first.”

“I asked you second,” she retorted.

“Ah, ah,” he cautioned, unable to deny, despite her attempts at divergence, that this was kind of fun. He took another half step closer. “Playground Rules means Ladies First.”
“Shucks. Nice to know chivalry isn’t dead,” she said dryly as she stood her ground. But there was a twinkle dancing in her eyes, a hint of mirth playing at the corners of her mouth.

Why was she fighting it so hard?

Tony shook it off. He couldn’t allow himself to be sidetracked by the quandary—and as much fun as their little sparring match was, he was still dangling off a cliff by his fingertips. Tony needed to strengthen his hold, and this tactic was getting him nowhere.

‘I’m Iron Man, I’m Iron Man, I’m Iron Man.’

Shoulders dropping along with the bravado, he tried for something a little more earnest.

Nowhere in his memory could Tony recall actually taking that last step that brought her within arms reach, a few hand-breadths away, really, but he did notice with rapt fascination the way her pupils dilated as he did, the sharp intake of air as the stubborn mask slipped from her face to leave it bare, utterly unguarded.

She didn’t move.

The world quieted.

“Why did you run?” He asked once more.

The words sounded soft to his ears, gentle even, spoken low but with distinction—said too loud and they would’ve shattered the fragile bubble in which they found themselves encased. Such simple words, but they carried all the weight of his sincerity and his crushing need to know; his lifeline cast in the absence of feigned hubris.

No more games.

There was no deflection this time, no automatic retort to stall as his Mate regarded him.

In her eyes, devoid the defensive shield she’d carried only moments before, he witnessed the kaleidoscope of emotions his question brought worth.

And what a thing to witness.

Flicking from one sentiment to the next with lightning-fast speed, her thoughts and emotions swayed and spun across that sea blue span with all the personification of a living Rubik’s Cube. Twisting and turning and flipping every side, every feeling and every possible consideration was a piece of the puzzle she was struggling to align coherently—but he could tell nothing was lining up, all the colors were all wrong, and on and on it went. If she lingered a while on any of them, Tony almost felt like he could name the sides: hurt, sympathy, confusion, longing, fear, exhaustion. A dizzying array, but one he embraced as a step up from their last encounter.

While she went through the effort of coming to terms with whatever had caused her to haul ass from his tower, Tony went through the motions of preparing himself for anything she threw at him. He was, ostensibly, a superhero—he could take it.

But as the seconds turned to minutes once again, Tony found himself increasingly less concerned with fortifying his case (ignoring the fact he didn’t yet know what that case might be) and far more distracted simply studying her.

Up close—and really, had he meant to step this close?—he began to pick out dozens of little things
that hadn’t registered to him before.

Opening that mental box once again, he propped it wide and started dropping every observation in one by one.

Like the itty-bitty mole resting just a pinky’s-width beneath the end of one delicately structured brow; or the tiny, barely discernible scar that stretched horizontally across the height of the opposite cheekbone, an inch or so in diameter and just that far from her ear. Said ears had been double-pierced, occupied now with simple silver studs and easily seen with her hair pulled back in a bun the way it was; a few strands had escaped to fall over her face, the sandy locks playing against the flush she still bore from running endearingly—or was that still from running?

He noted she was shorter than him—5’3 if he had to hazard a guess—coming up just higher than his chin; he noted the slender build of someone who engaged in regular exercise; and he noted a few ink stains on her fingers and the nails trimmed to perfection, kept long enough to be feminine but short enough to be functional. Tony remembered her hands had been smooth, so whatever work she did with them wasn’t rigorously manual. Some kind of artistry, perhaps? He’d noticed a few half-painted canvases’ leaning against one of the potted plants in the corner, the slight layer of dust on each indicating they’d been discarded. Or maybe the ink was from a hobby not regularly engaged in? The paintings could have been Big Red’s for all he knew.

Tony observed something else, too: for all the gracefully-born features of his Mate’s face, from the delicately pointed jaw to the moderately narrow, concave nose and the defined cheekbones, the eyes were almost anything but. Far more deep-set than the average, the way her eyes were housed within the shadow of her brow gave them an almost broody structure, a clear contradiction to the otherwise tender face in which they took up residence.

A fascinating contrast, that, and particularly well suited to haunting his every waking moment. Go figure.

The man didn’t know whether to remark upon the dark circles outlining them with shame or not, knowing he hadn’t been the only one losing sleep.

No, scratch that. He still felt bad. Par for the course.

Still waiting, Tony leaned his head forward and slightly to the side as he scrutinized her further, hoping the motion might spawn the girl into action.

She was still going through her wheel of decision-making, but her eyes tracked the movement regardless, making note of the fact he was still waiting.

He didn’t miss the hitch of her breath, nor the way her pupils dilated yet again.

You know. For someone who’d said ‘Not You’ like a curse, she certainly was prone to reacting to his physical proximity. How…thought-provoking.

It was as he was delving into those thoughts, itching to close the gap by just another inch or two to see if he got the same reaction but restraining himself, that Tony first discerned the gold in her eyes. He hadn’t been close enough to see it before. But he was now.

Piercing the rolling waves of blue and grey—on their own a collage of deep cobalt and teal and indigo and baby blue and steel grey—a few flecks of gold cast through the medley to carve their own path, like lone rays of sun which lanced through the clouds after a storm, touching upon the sea below.
With distinct and unprecedented awareness, Tony felt a shiver creep up the base of his spine.

He’d seen this sight before.

Encapsulated in the person before him, he’d seen this before.

Air trapped in his lungs, Tony couldn’t breath.

Three months.

Three damn months he’d been stuck in that cave. Three months of darkness, three months of sand and hard-packed earth, three months of sweltering heat and bitter cold; and after, days spent wandering the merciless desert, no water, no genuine belief he’d make it out of there alive. Only the driving imperative that he had to try because he’d promised Yinsen he would, promised Yinsen he wouldn’t waste his life.

Ask the press and they’d report that, upon his “heroic” return from captivity, Tony Stark had felt safe the moment that helicopter touched ground, bearing forth both hope and his best friend, and that was true…to a degree.

What he had felt was rescued. Rescued and fed and not in any immediate danger of torture. All nice things, of course.

But in truth, Tony had not felt safe until weeks later, on the day a storm rolled into Malibu. Uncharacteristically strong, and rare for the southern part of the state, the squall had approached overnight, bringing with it rain and roaring winds and thunderous waves. A nuisance for many; for Tony, he found solace in everything it wasn’t.

Tony’d had JAY open every window in the house.

While the rain had peeled in, soaking the carpet and streaking the sealed concrete floors, and the wind had whirled through the vast rooms and open hallways with a fierce cry, Tony had stood at the edge of the rear veranda and peered out into the face of the tempest. He hadn’t felt the cold of the downpour; he’d only felt the humidity and the sweet sensation of water on his skin, the sensations for which he’d been so long deprived. He hadn’t been cowered by the gale; he’d leaned into it, the taste of the breeze far more than he ever thought he’d feel again. He hadn’t been humbled by the howling waves, crashing beneath the cliff face and crying their strength; he’d only been dumbstruck, relieved, and indebted to hear and see what he thought he never would again.

The storm had brought him to silence, to drown in all the things he’d taken for granted before Afghanistan and all the things he yet had a second chance to live for.

On that morning, Tony had felt safe.

When the dark clouds had begun to lighten, the break of dawn splitting what remained of them like blazing pillars to paint the sea with fire, he’d felt welcomed home.

And now, here the sight again. Embodied in totality, beset within the eyes before him, Tony was staring into the aftermath of a storm.

The arc reactor throbbed in his chest.

Oh no.

They said eyes were the windows to the soul, but they’d never said whose
Much like when he’d faced the first one back home, Tony found himself similarly stunned to silence. Nothing seemed appropriate.

What could possibly encompass his thoughts? What could possibly encompass the complexities of the impasse in which he found himself?

Nothing.

But…he still had a mission, right? He’d come here for a purpose.

Yes. Yes, he had.

He was just opening his mouth to ask her, once again, because he’d ask however many times he needed to, desperation be damned even if he was breaking one of his cardinal rules for keeping his air of suave, when something on the wall behind her caught the sun and his eye. A framed document, with all the fancy, collegiate writing decrying its officiality.

In big, bold letters, the center of it was occupied with the words:

**CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT.**

Any other time, Tony might’ve stepped closer to read the fine details. But his eyes glossed over the minutiae because, just beneath the centered line, printed in the same font just slightly smaller, was a name.

A name that wasn’t Big Red’s, and one that certainly couldn’t have been her husbands.

‘Gotcha.’

*Artemis Maxwell Thatcher.*

Finally.

Inside, Tony beamed, could feel another tingle up his spine as he memorized every curve and dip of it.

With one big sharpie, Tony gave his mental box a proper label and mused that, for such a small victory, his confidence had grown ten times over; he was encouraged even as he pondered that her parents must’ve had some sense of humor in naming her.

Smiling inside, he tried one more time in the same voice as before. It had already worked to a degree to disarm her, might as well layer it on.

“Why’d you run?”

It came out so low this time he wondered if she’d even heard him. But the small quiver of her bottom lip gave her away.

Squaring her jaw, she looked him in the eye. “None of your business.”

‘*I think you’re lying,*’ he thought. But about what escaped him.

For all that she’d said it, so entirely lacking in any kind of weight or conviction, the words might as well have been a leaf carried away during a flood; the last ditch effort of someone who’d run dry their list of excuses.
It hurt. But he wasn’t deterred that easily.

Tony allowed the flare of pain in for a moment, allowed it to fuel him, before locking it away. He was a grown ass man, and he was a grown ass man experienced enough to know when people lashed out with the intent of keeping themselves from being hurt. He knew a prime example.

“I beg to differ,” he said evenly, boost he’d gained keeping him from collapse at the fact her stance was pretty much everything he’d ever worried it would be. “Your words, literally branded on my skin, beg to differ, too.”

She flinched, just a little.

Tony took a steadying breath, focusing on the ground beneath his feet, on its reliability, before continuing.

“Now, I don’t know what it is I’ve done. I don’t know how exactly I’ve offended you, or your family, or your sensibilities, or whatever it is that’s earned me your hate, but I do know—”

“I don’t hate you.” Her eyes had flickered with shock, clear surprise wiping every other trace of expression she’d had away like waves did footsteps on a beach.

Great. So she didn’t hate him, she just didn’t want him.

That cleared everything right up.

*

Hate him.

_Hate_ him?

Ha.

As _if_.

The only thing she hated was the fact that it _was_ him. That, and whoever-slash-whatever had deigned to enable this modus operandi in the first place. She’d thought it before and she thought it again now, but whatever force was responsible deserved a real kick in the teeth; or a medal, if you asked the general population.

And the way he was looking at her—_gods_.

‘Please stop looking at me like that.’

But hate him? Was that what he’d been thinking? Was that the impression she’d left him with?

Arty could only exercise regret and sheer absurdity at the thought.

“I don’t hate you,” she repeated, couldn’t help as the words spilled from her mouth of their own volition. She was very aware she was approaching dangerous waters here, if the protective voice rousing in the back of her mind was anything to go by, and she needed to tread carefully. One wrong move or slip of the tongue and Arty’d be cast from the boat, without a line, to fend for herself—no way of maintaining control.

She couldn’t allow that to happen. ‘_Steer the boat, Arty._’
Yeah. Steer the boat.

“I’m sorry,” she said, swallowing past her fear and trying not to let her hands on the wheel shake as she engaged him. “Really, I am.” She flexed her toes against the carpet, trying to memorize the sensation through her socks for something to hold tight. “If...if that’s what you’ve been thinking, then I apologize.” She meant it.

_He was not_ helping the situation.

Eyes more brown and alive and intense than any pair had a right to be, the man was dissecting her and every word she said with methodical aplomb, picking them apart with visual scrutiny and holding them under a microscope.

Not fair.

Arty jabbed her toes into the carpet harder, letting her lungs expand as far as she was capable. It wasn’t far enough.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. ‘Steer the boat.’

“It was never my intent to...never my intent for it to seem that way.” Also true. She took a quick peek through her lashes to see if he was at least starting to believe her.

Big mistake.

The look he was giving her now snatched her carefully collected air right from her lungs. It wasn’t the look he’d worn back at his tower, when she’d been minding her own damn business and packing up Brits stuff when he’d suddenly been there in all his glory, smirking at her and making her feel like the prettiest girl at the party—even though that was stupid, she knew, because in his pre-Iron Man days that was probably something he’d flashed all over the world—and it wasn’t the look he’d given her when she’d taken off for safer pastures, holed up in the elevator.

This was much, much worse.

This wasn’t the look of the man she’d seen on the news, nor the man she’d seen in the tower, not even the man she’d left reeling with confusion. This was the look of a man, a salt-of-the-earth, flesh-and-blood human, and not the look of whatever mask of the day he’d chosen to apply. And he was looking at her like all the defenses she’d raised and manned and secured with pikes were nothing but smoke, an illusion that meant less than nothing before his eyes as he picked clean through to her bones with meticulous but forceful zest.

Wheel spun clear out of her grasp, Arty felt open. She felt exposed and vulnerable and bare. She felt _seen._

Arty was blatantly, obscenely offended. She hated it.

It was unfair. Some straight bullshit. Every single odd was overwhelmingly stacked in his favor.

Why was he doing this to her? Why hadn’t he gotten the point and skedaddled?

And why was the air so thin? She could barely breathe.

Probably—no, _definitely_—his fault, she reasoned. Her Mate was much bigger than she was, and logic therefore dictated he would require more oxygen. Logic, logic, logic. The only constant in this desolate wasteland.
And had he done something to his eyes? Making a metal suit wasn’t enough for him and he had to go and do some kind of super-secret, super advanced surgery on them, making them into weapons all their own, sending subliminal messages out there that made her pliant and pathetic and lacking any kind of resistance?

What the fuck.

‘Snap out of it.’

Arty dug her nails into her palms and stepped to the side. A little bit of breathing room was good, right?

Sizeable gap now between them, though still closer than she would’ve like, she felt a little better. She shoved that creeping part of her that decried the move as unnatural into the hold of the boat and locked it in, feeling even better. More clear-headed. Using both hands to stop the careening wheel, she wrested in back into a maneuverable position.

‘Breathe, breathe, breathe. You’ve got this.’

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she said honestly, ignoring the embarrassing tremor that inflicted the words even as she was wondered just how someone like her could ever hurt someone like him. “And I’m very sorry if I did.”

She couldn’t pull her eyes away. Maybe if she yanked them from her skull and donated them to charity.

“I-It’s not you,” she attempted again, running on autopilot before the deep brown weapons of mass destruction, “and it’s not anything you’ve done…” The words stumbled to a halt once again as he leaned a little closer. In retrospect, it was probably just so he could hear what the fuck she was saying because, after all, she could barely hear herself.

Arty did not have this. This was not a good look on her, and she didn’t get this way.

She took another step away, easing around the coffee table. He kept his upper body aimed at her all the while like a magnet.

He had to have put something in the air. With all the time the man had in the apartment between Brits text and Arty’s arrival, he had to have released some kind of intoxicating and-or-paralyzing agent into the room, leaving her susceptible to his charms.

The worst part was that he wasn’t even really trying. He was really only looking at her.

That made her all the more livid with herself.

‘Please stop looking at me like that please stop looking at me like that please stop looking at me like tha—’

Forget maintaining a steady course, the steering wheel had been ripped clean off the control board.

Fuck.

Disengage.

Arty tried to paddle at the water, tried to steer the boat by leaning over the side and slapping uselessly into the murk to turn things back in her favor.
DISENGAGE.

She knew exactly where this path ended and she didn’t want any single part of it.

‘Please turn please turn please turn.’

Arty was so desperate at this point she was tempted to wrap her person in chains so that, when the boat finally did collapse on itself, she would at least perish quickly.

 Conjuring the chains of her salvation, she started knotting and locking them about her person, hoping she’d at least have the ounce of control left to jump herself before the tide of inevitability consumed her, but then he tilted his head to the side, dialing up the power of his scrutiny to nuclear proportions and Arty was left trying to fight her way to the side of the boat, fighting tooth and nail against the quick double-beat in her pounding chest and the cruel flutter that had taken flight in her stomach and the rising heat in her cheeks that may or may not have been the sudden realization that Marcos was right, and he really did smell like ecstasy and sin and a little bit of coffee, and the even worse realization that she was standing there, sweaty, in her ratty running tank-top and probably not smelling quite so fantastic and—

 And there it was: the shaky, haunting footage of him falling from the sky. The now-staple of her nightly terrors, right on time.

 For maybe the first time in two weeks, she didn’t cringe at the mental footage. She couldn’t cringe at that which saved her from herself. Self-preservation was a powerful thing, and it had come to shield her once again.

 Arty closed her eyes, and tried not to realize she was grateful. She could still feel the flush of warmth suffusing her head, could still feel the lightning racing up and down her spine. But at least she no longer felt like she was on death row.

 When she opened her eyes one final time, it was to behold a new look on his face. One that didn’t leave her feeling at his mercy, but one that caused an almost equal amount of scrutiny on her part.

 He was looking at her with…what was that, concern? Horror? Or both?

 Unless her skull had finally split with the pressure and revealed to him the hurricane within, she really wasn’t sure what she’d done to warrant such an expression. She’d been trying to relieve him of his concerns, not confirm them.

 Either way, she wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

 Looking at her this way meant he wasn’t looking at her the other way, which meant she could find her voice that Ursula’s villainous ass had stolen and maybe gain some traction again, build up some fortitude.

 *

 It might’ve been the blush that did it. Was almost certainly the blush.

 Or maybe it was the simple fact that, absent the appearance of panic, terror, and anger, her face had smoothed with her initial shock to evince something he’d failed to notice.

 For the first time in two weeks, it dawned on him, with a kind of mind numbing alarm, just how young she was.
For all Tony’d been replaying her in his mind, replaying the moment he’d first seen her smile, to the way she’d almost texted him back, and to the way she’d glared at him only minutes ago.

…how, exactly, had he missed that?

It wasn’t like it was hard to see.

Aside from the subtle scar there wasn’t a single line on her face. No creases around the mouth, no furrow to her brow, no wrinkles about the eyes. Her bright complexion glowed with health, her rosy cheeks standing fresh against fair skin. Dark circles notwithstanding, her face was almost the pinnacle of youth.

Filled with an edged disquiet at his own slip-up, Tony took five mental steps back.

With each step, brain cells firing faster than the speed of light, the man picked and wrangled and kneaded every scrap of what he’d managed to piece together about her, hoping for—what, exactly? Relief? Any clue to the contrary? A hidden vampire gene excluding her from mortal failings?

Tony hadn’t looked in the file and therefore he lacked anything definitive. And while the photos on the wall provided varying bits of insight, there was nothing to point to the manner of her age. Most of the photos were of Big Red and her husband, some wedding photos included, and the dozen or so depicting his Mate all appeared to be recent to a degree: there were pictures of her in an Aquarium, leaning over a sandy pool, eyes squinted with laughter as the fin of a bat ray brushed against her hand; another picture in the same Aquarium, taken from behind as her silhouette was clear before a giant tank of jellyfish; a few photos of her outside, standing next to waterfalls or Redwoods or great towers of rocks; and many more of her with the married couple.

But no old, grainy photos, no pictures of Big 80’s Hair forced onto her by a parent, no nothing that could steer him right.

Had he been thrown off by some of her movie choices while she was entertaining her friend? Possibly. She’d thrown quite a range in there.

Wait.

The Certificate of Achievement. It might have a date on it. But it was somewhere over his shoulder now, away from the face requiring his immediate attention, and if he turned to look she might be spooked.

There was the Berkeley hoodie. If that didn’t imply she was at least old enough to have graduated…

The sweatshirt didn’t necessarily have to have originally belonged to her, though. And it had been awfully baggy on her slight frame. It could have been handed down from a relative, maybe bought from a thrift store, or stolen from a boyfriend. Tony shot down all three as unlikely in quick succession—one, it didn’t look worn enough to be a hand-me down; two, one of the photos on the far wall was of a group of people outside, some of them bedecked with similar outerwear, posing for a picture and mugging for the camera even though they were clearly all covered in dirt; and three, Tony’d scoured all the photos he could like a hawk and found no trace of his Mate with anyone he might describe as a significant other. Not that he’d looked for that first, or anything, and not that the absence of a photo along those lines in the living room denied its existence.

The hidden vampire gene was out too, for obvious reasons. She spent way too much time in the sun, and she did an awful lot of blushing for someone who’d have—

“—re staring at me.”
Tony struggled back to himself. “What?”

“You’re staring at me.”

“…No I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Says who?”

“What th—says me. What are you, twelve?”

‘What are you, early twenties?’

Tony shook his head thoroughly and drew an unsteady breath. He hadn’t been prepared for any of this today and he sure as shit wasn’t prepared now to follow that distinct possibility down the rabbit hole. He needed to focus on something else immediately, before the idea consumed him. One thing at a time, he told himself. But deep in his gut, the knot of disquiet refused to unfurl. One thing at a time. Was that maybe part of the reason that she—

No. One thing at a time.

“Look,” he started, exceedingly grateful his voice did not betray his mental turbulence, “I realize we may have gotten off on the wrong, uh, foot.” He stopped to tap and wave the sneaker lazily between them. “So to speak.”

Tony could’ve sworn he spied a twitch at her mouth.

He continued. “And I realize, for whatever reason, and certainly counter to expectations, you don’t want a damn thing to do with me. Which—points for novelty, in your favor.”

Something sparked in her eyes and was dampened quickly.

Tony forged on. “But consider: there’s a reason for that,” and here he gestured pointedly behind her, directly toward the small mirror by the bookshelf at her back. She turned her head, albeit slowly as though he might pounce if she took her eyes off him, to follow his gaze.

She followed it all the way out of the corner of her eye to her reflection, and all the way to the words, his words, resting half-visible beneath the strap of her tank top.

“Now, judge this the humble quirk of a scientist, if you will, but…I’m curious to know just what that reason might be.” She just kept staring at the reflection, lost in thought, eyes glued to the words etched on her shoulder blade. “Any chance you’re, uh, interested in a do-over? Minus the Olympic sprint and the rolling around on the floor?”

Turns out drawing attention to his words might not have been the best idea.

Coming full circle to the contrary, where Tony felt they had been making so much progress only minutes ago, his Mate yanked her head back to him, eyes filled with that same all-consuming panic he’d received back at the tower. The rigidity returned to her stance, as did the yearning look towards the door. Clasped against her upper arms, her hands were trembling.

Okay. Okay, maybe he’d pushed enough for one day.

He wasn’t about to make her flee her own home.
With great reluctance, Tony stepped away and held his hands back high, yielding, ignoring the pain in his chest and the raging hurt that he was responsible.

He waited until the slight tremors in her hands stopped and she broke her visual connection to the door, looking back at him with veiled eyes, before he extended Leftie in the space before them.

She accepted the long awaited sneaker gingerly, careful not to accidentally brush his fingers as she did. Once firmly in her grasp, Tony let go. His hand fell uselessly to his side.

Surprising the hell out of him, she said quietly, “Thank you. For bringing it back.”

Exhaling a shaky breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding, Tony cleared his throat. “Ah, don’t thank me. I’m the one who did the abducting in the first place.” His Mate blinked at him beneath long lashes, panic gradually ebbing from her dream-haunting eyes. “‘Sides,” he said, waving a dismissive hand, “it made a good hostage. No complaining, no demands for food or water—the silent type.”

She didn’t say anything, but she did stand a little taller as relief seemed to seep into her; she must’ve sensed this moment was at an end, and was breathing easier for it.

‘Guess that’s as good a sign as any I’ve overstayed my welcome.’

When she finally did speak, as Tony was already halfway to the door, she surprised him again. “Glad to know it was on its best behavior,” she quipped, almost as if she couldn’t resist him having the last word. “I don’t know if it could’ve survived the injustice, being both a rookie and de-soled.”

Tony turned back to her, taking in the slightly pleased tone with a boost of confidence. She met his gaze softly, but offered nothing else.

That was enough for him. He removed his sunglasses from the rim of his shirt and finished the last few steps to the door.

Tony paused, hand on the knob, that named certificate nagging at him.

With his back to her, he smiled. Just a little.

Tony had to do it, couldn’t let the opportunity pass him by.

Turning back one final time, sunglasses still in hand and playfulness pulling at his mouth, he said:

“So. Artemis, huh?”

Her reaction made it all worth it—flushing with all the color of a strawberry and gaping at him like a fish, she stuttered gibberish as her embarrassment eclipsed her win of seconds before. Thrown off balance, but not necessarily in a bad way.

Tony smiled wider, allowing a little tease to creep into the grin. “As in Ye Olde Goddess?”

If it was possible her blush turned ten shades darker.

He reveled in it, reveled in knowing he could at least get that out of her before he left.

Chuckling along in his mind and stowing that expression away, Tony put the glasses on and turned the handle.

He was just about to close the door behind him, however much his limb fought the move as
unnatural, when he heard her voice call out.

“It’s Arty,” she said.

Tony stopped the door dead in its tracks, hand firm on the wood.

His Mate shuffled slightly on her feet, floor occupying her visual interest as she bit the inside of her cheek. When she finally met the intensity of his gaze, having seemed to reach some sort of understanding with herself, she shrugged her shoulders and repeated herself.

“My name. I go by Arty. And I don’t hate you.”

And with that she left him, turning on her heel and stalking back to the kitchen.

Tony saw himself out.

Once back in the New York City-fresh air, ducking down the nearest alley to the road in which he’d stashed his Just Blending In Car, Tony couldn’t help wondering why he didn’t feel more disappointed. He hadn’t received an answer, nor had he gained a second chance…right?

Well.

He had gained something after all—he’d gained a name.

Arty.

For now, it was enough.

* * *

Brit was prepared the moment she stepped foot inside the apartment, ducking just as the pillow soared overhead, missing her by an inch. It hit the hallway wall with a thud, taking some of the peeling plaster with it as it fell to the ground.

She sighed and picked up the pillow, readjusting her shoulders so the duffel didn’t slip off, and closed the door behind her reentry.

Arty was waiting, leaning against the couch in much the same position as she’d left her friends Mate in, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

The blonde was livid, but she spoke quietly, her carefully modulated anger slightly more scary for it.

“You let him in.”

Brit nodded. She had let him in.

“You gave him cookies.

She’d done that, too.

“My carefully saved cookies. My Dark Chocolate Peppermint Joe Joe’s.”

The redhead nodded again.

Arty tilted her head to the side, fire burning hotter in her eyes. “What, exactly, do you have to say for yourself?”
Brit stood her ground, swinging the pillow lightly, and held aloft the plastic bag in her other hand. “I brought pot stickers for dinner.”

The blonde’s cheek twitched. “You can’t buy me.”

“Not trying to buy anything,” the taller girl shrugged, tossing the pillow back at her friend and letting the duffle ease to the floor. She set their dinner on the entry stand. “Just trying to feed you.”

“I’m not hungry. You wasted your time.”

“Liar.”

“Why’d you do it, Brit?” Arty’s voice was trembling, lip quivering as she blinked fiercely. “Why? Do you know what that was like for me? Do you have any idea what that took?”

‘Yes,’ she thought. ‘I do.’

It might not have been Brits life, and it might not have been her words, but she knew.

Brit had been there the day Arty’d turned eighteen, had been there and held her hand as her friend spent her birthday crouched over in pain as the tattoo artist covered up the words on her back. She’d held Arty, even though she refused to cry, even though she was determined this was the best thing for her because at least now she never had to see them even if she couldn’t forget them. A literal weight off her back, she’d said.

Brit had been there the next day, too, when Arty had shown up at her and Marcos’ place, eyes red and silent, to remove her shirt and show the taller girl the words that had returned with a vengeance, raw and hot against fair skin. In all the time she’d known Arty, and all the time she’d known her since, that had been the only occasion she’d seen the blonde shed tears over her Soulmate.

“It was supposed to be easy,” Arty flung the pillow back with force. “Easy. Not this. This was not how any of it was supposed to go. It wasn’t supposed to be him.”

‘But it is him.’

“It wasn’t supposed to be something I could never escape. And you—you made damn sure I couldn’t escape it! Why would you do that to me?”

Arty was standing now and grabbed yet another throw pillow, sending it along the path of its predecessor. Brit let it hit this time. It was just a pillow.

“What were you trying to make this harder? Were you trying to see just how much punishment I could take? Was this a test that Johnni put you up to?! Trying to see if I’m capable of coping?!”

Another pillow, then another. Brit let them connect, too, only turning her face slightly when the last hit her dully in the head. Arty might want to take it easy—they only had one throw pillow left that wasn’t piled at her feet.

“I was doing just fine!” The blonde was one decibel short of a shriek. “Just fine! Who the hell do you think you are?! Who gave you the right t—”

“Name it.”

Arty stopped mid-rant, last pillow cocked and ready to fly. “Name what?”

“That feeling that you’re having. The one you’re pretending is something else. Name it.”
Arty faltered a moment to glare at her.

Brit stood her ground. “I know you know what it is. Otherwise this *would* have been easy. So come on, out with it.”

“I’m not *pretending* anything, I’m feeling a lot of things,” she spat, bewildered, “so you can take your “knowledge” and shove it right up your—”

“—name it.”

“There is nothing to name! I don’t know where you’re getting this delusion—”

“NAME IT!”

“GUILT!” Arty all but screamed, burying her face into the pillow and screaming some more. “I feel guilt!” A tremor wracked the girl’s shoulders.

Brit took a deep breath and nodded. Finally. “And why do you feel guilt?”

Arty mumbled into the pillow then was silent.

“Come again?”

The blonde only removed her face after several minutes, eyes strained and face in distress, but did not speak.

“Why do you feel guilt, Arty? You haven’t done anything.”

Arty looked miserable, eyes red rimmed as though close to her tears. But no tears came.

The blonde shut her eyes and squeezed the pillow in her lap. When she opened them again, she fixed her sights on the TV. The words were hollow when she said them:

“Because its unfair. All of it. Anyone would’ve deserved so much better. *He* would’ve deserved so much better than this, than me.”

Brit took a few steps closer. “Why does the burden of guilt fall on you for that?”

“Because, it’s not *his* fault. It’s not his fault his Mate is some out-of-whack humpty-dumpty broken human who only managed to slap together her pieces with tape…and not even the *good* tape, either. More like dumb Scotch tape—the not-clear kind that sucks.”

‘*Oh kid,*’ the redhead thought. ‘*If only you could see yourself from the outside.*’

“It’s not *his* fault he had to get stuck with me;” the girl continued, “and it’s not *his* fault I can’t have anything to do with him. I can’t.”

Arty’s hands started to shake and she buried them in her hair to stop the trembling, elbows on her knees to find quarter herself some privacy. “I can’t do it, Brit, I can’t.”

Brit crouched before her, balancing on her heels as she placed her hands gently on either side of the girls knees.

She waited.

She waited until the tremors stopped and the girl’s hands loosened their hold on her hair. Then,
squeezing softly, she said, “You asked me why I let him in. You asked me why I let him stay.”

The blonde said nothing, but her fingers flexed a little.

“You know me, Arty. And I know you. I did what I did precisely because, while I might not know
how this all eventually plays out, or what you decide…I do know who you’re not, and I do know
what you’re not.

“You, Arty, are not cruel. Yeah, I guess we both thought this was gonna’ be easy when your time
came. ‘Hello and So Long, Soulmate’, you know—the plan was nice. But that’s not what happened,
that’s not what is happening. I guess we maybe should’ve prepared for the universe to be a bit more
of a bitch in your case, but, well, there’s no point in dreaming of a road that no longer exists.”

Brit gave another comforting squeeze and reached up, grasping the girl’s hands in her own and
removing them from her head. Clasping them together in one hand, the redhead used her free one to
sweep aside the blondes hair and poke her in the chin.

Arty looked at her.

“You’re not Leah, Arty-Pants. While yeah, you may have run from your problems, you don’t run
from your problems.” Brit ignored how awkward the phrasing sounded, even to her ears. “You
would’ve never forgiven yourself if you’d let it hang like this. And you never will forgive yourself if
you don’t, at the very least, clear your own conscience—preferably by clearing his. Sooner, rather
than later.”

She poked the blonde in the chin once more.

“You’ve done amazing, Arty-Pants. Really. I mean compared to where you were when I first met
you, you’ve come so far. With Johnni, with everyone else, everything you’ve worked on…I
couldn’t, in good conscience, let you slide back into that stoic, walled-up place I found your pitiful
ass in”—and here Arty gave her a look—“without at least putting up a fight—it’s literally in my job
description as your friend. Sometimes you just gotta’ do dumb shit with your friends, and other times
you gotta’ stop them from making mistakes…even if that means chucking a boulder at their head.

“I’m sorry,” she said, stressing the words, “that this hurt you. I knew it would. But I’d do it all over
again if it meant helping you put things into perspective. I waited for you to call Johnni yourself but
that didn’t happen, so…enter me, I guess.

“I will always be there for you, huh? I’ll be there for you when, or if, you need a shoulder to cry on.
I’ll be there when you need help. But believe me; I’ll also be there to give a little kick in the
shins when you’re being detrimentally dishonest with yourself. Ain’t no Arty-Pants gonna’ lose her
integrity on my watch.”

Her friend didn’t say anything, just stared at her. Morose. The redhead knew she’d gotten through,
could tell by the still energy that had settled between them.

Arty would be fine. And she’d take care of it.

With all-around exhaustion, but a good days work behind her, Brit collapsed onto the couch next to
her.

There was silence.

It was nice. Peaceful. Arty was able to employ her breathing exercises and Brit listened as she did so.
A car alarm went off outside some twenty minutes later, setting off the shrieking of a cat.

Just as well. They’d performed a new routine at the studio today and Brit was starving. Patting Arty on the leg, the redhead rescued their pot stickers from where she’d left them, wading through the sea of pillows to and from, and pulled out a set of chopsticks.

Brit offered them to Arty. “Am I absolved of my crimes?”

Arty sniffed. She didn’t respond immediately, letting Brit stew.

Finally she got her response. “Only as long as you brought ice cream, too.”

Brit faux-gasped, and walked over to the duffel to retrieve it. “You mean, this ice cream?” She pulled the pint from the bag, wiping off some of the condensation.

Arty narrowed her eyes. “Ben and Jerry’s?”

“Of course.”

“…Chocolate Therapy?”

“What else?”

“…Fine. Friendship written in stone for another five and a half years.”

The redhead’s face scrunched. “Five and a half?”

“Yeah. Makes it a nice, rounded year. Wouldn’t want to drop a friendship in the middle of July or something.” She accepted the ice cream Brit handed her, setting it on the arm of the couch as she opened the dinner container.

They flipped through TV channels idly, not really finding any that struck their fancy.

Brit waited until they’d finished off the last of their meal and Arty was just digging into her almost-soupy ice cream before she asked the question she’d been dying to ask.

“You didn’t end up throwing anything at him, did you?”

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Arty heads off to Stark Tower to explain some things. Is the third time the charm?

Also again, sorry for the late post! I hope this chap is acceptable and I reallyyyyyyy hope you can't tell I was a little sleep deprived for the edit.

As always, updates will be on Sundays! Every Sunday if I can manage it, every other Sunday otherwise :) So if you don't get an update next week, work probably just bit me in the ass and I'll be back the following weekend. Cheers!
Chapter Summary

JARVIS comes in clutch (kind of), Arty tells her story (most of it), and Tony doesn't do what she expects (does he ever?)

(Warning for this chapter: there are brief mentions of suicide, physical abuse and alcohol abuse closer to the end)

Chapter Notes

Yeah, I have...no words that could sum up how completely, totally sorry I am this Chapter has been 84 years in the making. Work stuff got in the way the first two weeks, but beyond that it's been a StruggleTM: this chapter is easily 2.5 times the length of my normal chapters, so putting it all together, editing it, and ensuring I got all the elements that needed to be here while maintaining the right tone was Grade-A Difficult. In another life this could've been three individual chapters, but it was important they all stick together, so here--have a mammoth! Again, I can't apologize more for the wait.

AND again, this story continues to get the most.amazing.responses!!! I literally could not possibly be happier with everyone's kind words and how everyone has taken such a shining to the work, how many people have subscribed and bookmarked and kudo'd and commented. I am FLOORED, actually FLOORED, and I'm so lucky to be able to share with you all! Thanks a million guys, you are all the best, and I can't thank you more for your patience <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘You’re a dumb bitch.’

Yep. She was painfully aware.

‘Did you hear me? This is a mistake,’ the voice warned.

‘I got it, thanks,’ she told it.

‘Literally the dumbest.’

At least she’d be a dumb bitch with a clear conscience. After today, she would go on living her life and put this whole fiasco behind her.

Arty just had to make it past the doors.

Easy-peasy.

But the large glass entrance at the base of Stark Tower only became more ominous the closer she got, coming up like a damned tsunami front…so she pivoted on her heel and stalked back to the
alleyway from whence she’d come to continue her pacing for the fifth time; she really hoped there wasn’t someone behind those security cameras watching and labeling her a “shifty character” for as many times as she’d approached the entrance and backtracked not ten feet away.

Who knew glass doors could be so intimidating? They were just doors. And the walk she’d taken to get here had been just a walk, nothing to warrant the pounding in her ears and the crushing knot in her stomach. The lobby inside the entrance would be just a lobby, and the talk she intended to have with the man of the tower would be just a talk. Nothing to be scared of: she’d be in, speak her peace to hopefully grant him some of his own, and she’d be out.

No harm done.

Arty swiveled away from the entrance on her sixth try nevertheless, returning to the solace provided by the alley. She was honestly shocked she hadn’t worn a dent in the asphalt by now. Pulling clenched hands from the pockets of her jacket, Arty rubbed at her temples, massaging the area firmly. She’d given herself a pep talk before she left the apartment and she’d given herself twenty more on the long way here—this hesitation was giving her nothing she hadn’t already prepared for except a massive headache.

‘It’s not too late, you know. You can turn around right now and go on home. Buy a plane ticket and get as far from New York as possible.’

Arty was very aware she could do just that, and it was tempting. But she wouldn’t.

Brit had been right: she wasn’t Leah.

Arty just had to bite the bullet and get it over with. Unfortunately, eating metal was easier said than done.

‘You’ve got this,’ she commanded herself, ‘so buck up for fuck’s sake.’

Arty may have been caught unawares last time, but she’d gone to great mental lengths to ensure she wouldn’t be left feeling like a mermaid in the Sahara this go round; not to mention she’d fortified herself with a shower, so at least she wouldn’t be left wallowing at the existence of her sweaty personage.

Yeah. She had this.

Seven really was a lucky number, apparently, because Arty’s next foray from the alley was also her last.

Approaching the door with determination, she grabbed the elegant handle with maybe a little too much force and pushed it open—oops, not open. Of course it would be a ‘Pull’ door, because the universe just loved throwing tiny wrench’s in her way.

She pulled it open, more than a little red in the face as the security guard did her a solid by pretending not to notice.

Being around lunchtime, the lobby was far livelier than it had been for Brit’s recertification. Fancy-suited people were going to and fro like flocks of grey-toned birds, pursuing food or midday gatherings or the odd business-lunch combo; the air was bursting with casual chatter about the weekend, the ‘No, tell Susan to push the meeting to Three’-s, and the occasional ‘You tell Simon it’s not MY department’s fault the lab blew up’-s alike. Periodic beeps joined the hubbub with a clear ping every time an employee or guest scanned their ID’s or temporary passes on their way to the inner and upper levels. Arty got maybe ten steps into the lobby, dodging bodies and briefcases alike,
before her brain decided to register that very important piece of information. She stopped dead in her tracks, thought occurring that she hadn’t the slightest clue what she was doing.

How, exactly, was she going to get up there? How was she even going to get beyond the lobby?

Arty wasn’t the guest of a guest this time around. She wasn’t a reporter or corporate liaison or anything of the sort that might lend her legitimacy. She had no credible reason for being here—well, none that she would fess up to. She’d been concerned enough seeing him that she hadn’t given the finer details the slightest thought.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could she have forgotten that?

‘...You’re a dumb bitch.’

The dumbest.

Arty was only just able to stop her eyes from rolling out of their sockets.

There was always the option of texting the man, letting him know she was down here, but the idea held little appeal. She’d scrapped the idea the night before already: if he didn’t know she was coming, she had every chance of backing out. There also might’ve been a tad bit of vindictive payback behind the move, in that she really, really wanted to catch him by surprise; he’d caught her off guard wholesale by appearing the way he did, and the bratty part of her wanted to return the favor. Said bratty part, in turn, may also have been a total cover for the fact she needed every ounce of control she could get and she did not want to give him time to charge his Super-weapon eyes. Not that they needed charging. Damn things were probably on standby 24/7.

It was ridiculous. How did any human leave the womb with lethal weapons in their head? Not fair, man.

And the smirk too?

The smirk?

Nah.

Nope, nada, not a chance. No.

He was armed to the teeth as it was and needed zero additional time to make himself more dangerous.

A man barreling towards, focused solely on the phone in his hands, was enough to make Arty practically dive out of the way. Yanked from her scoffed musings, she wove her way through the madness to take up a spot along the walls.

There, keeping one eye on the crowd, she weighed her options.

Trying to sneak in with a group was out of the question. This wasn’t a movie theater or an amusement park or some two-bit club—they checked everyone for ID and would only mark those trying to be crafty with the utmost suspicion (and likely threat). She could try for a lie, say she was on an errand regarding the recertification process for a friend, An Actual Employee—she remembered the number of Thomas Pritchard’s office and everything—but that would require hoping they couldn’t get in touch with Marcos before she could. Still, even if she did manage to get by, which she wouldn’t, she hadn’t the slightest clue where to go from there. Just pop on into an elevator and hope for a button that said ‘Lord of the Tower’? No. Arty was reaching and she knew it, her
attempt at a lie pathetically half-baked and full of holes.

Severely lacking for even half a brilliant idea, Arty wondered if maybe this was a sign after all. She
couldn’t get beyond the ground level, and even if she did, what was to say he’d even be here? Not a
damn thing.

Really, she should just go, come back when she’d thought of something good and wouldn’t be a
bother…

“Can we help you, Miss?”

She tuned out the question.

It took the speaker one more try before Arty realized she was the one being addressed. Following the
voice to its owner a dozen feet away, a professional looking woman behind an information desk with
hair in a tight bun, Arty felt her stomach sink. Along with her male partner, the woman took her in
with barely-concealed mistrust—because who wouldn’t, Arty was the only person in the lobby who
clearly didn’t belong with her jeans and not-tailored jacket and well-worn sneakers. Compared to
everyone else, she looked like she’d been picked off the streets and tossed into a GQ photo shoot.
The hovering, combined with the nervous hands-in-pockets, couldn’t be doing her any favors either.
The duo looked robust enough to pick her up and toss her out on her ass if she gave them reason to,
and both looked as if they’d done just that for breakfast.

Okay then.

Walking out was out, otherwise she’d just confirm fears she was up to no good and probably lead to
an altercation.

Arty did not want to go two-for-two on being tackled in this building.

Shifting on her feet, sheer propriety propelled Arty to take a step forward. Her mind may have been a
blank slate on a bed of panic, but damned if she wouldn’t at least try to employ Brit’s doe-eyed trick
to loosen their worries. She didn’t need to fully convince them of any story, she just needed it to be
convincing enough she could leave in peace.

With her most casual ‘Who Me?’ face, Arty approached the desk.

She could always play up the stupidity card and ask for directions like a tourist—no one generally
gave them points for intelligence. Stark Tower wasn’t something one just “stumbled into”, though.
And the last thing she could do was tell them why she was actually here; besides, how many times
had these two probably heard the exact same thing from rabid fans? How many times had they carted
off crying, dramatic individuals claiming Tony Stark had said their words on TV once? She just
needed something believable enough to warrant her presence that would also get her back out the
door with undue attention.

Idea tugging at the back of her mind, she ran with it.

Plastering a mildly embarrassed look on her features, Arty rested her forearms on the tall counter
easily and brushed some escaping hair behind her ear.

“Uh, hi there,” she said, summoning a shy smile to her lips. “So sorry to bother you, but maybe you
can help me—or can’t, no worries either way!” Arty’s voice had crept up in pitch, donning her
Unobtrusive Customer persona.

“You see, I’m a grad student at UC Berkeley,” she lied, “and I’ve just come over to visit my
grandmother for the summer, help her get some things back in order after the, uh, “aliens”, you know?” She threw some finger quotes into the air to loosen the tension, smiling. “But while I was here I thought I’d do a little research for a paper I’m working on next semester, about the alien attack and the Avengers and how people in New York, especially, feel about all of”—Arty gestured wildly around her—“this. Folks back home weren’t in the thick of it, so I’m trying to get a sense of where locals stand in their opinions of, like, bona fide Superheroes and extraterrestrial life. That sort of thing.

“Things are changing so fast,” she layered it on thick, immersing herself fully in the ruse, “and we’re all sort of struggling to keep up and maintain our grips on what we thought we knew.” Another smile, another round of batting eyelashes. The suspicion had eased from their faces considerably, shoulders relaxing. “Anyways, for the sake of comprehensive reporting I thought I’d start right here! What better place to get an authentic take than with Stark Industries’ staff?”

Arty gave another reassuring smile before holding up her hands in mock submission. “Now, I realize I’m not with any legitimate news outlet, and a college paper is hardly on your guys’ radar,” she said with humble ‘understanding’, “I’m just trying to do a little digging, so I thought I’d at least give it a shot by popping on by. But, seeing how busy it is in here and seeing as I don’t have any authorization, I totally, totally understand if you can’t tell me anything.” She leaned closer, dramatically half-whispering, “My professor told me I was good as dead if I didn’t at least try.”

She shrugged her shoulders modestly, knowing full well the response she’d be given. They’d politely tell her they couldn’t reveal such information, conflicts of interest and all that, and then Arty’d be politely on her way.

The male guard looked patient, almost sad as he let her down. “I’m sorry Miss, but unfortunately—”

“She has authorization.”

Arty started, jolting as a voice emanated from nowhere yet everywhere.

She looked around for someone she’d missed, an unknown fourth party who’d snuck up on her. Despite how busy it was she could’ve sworn they were alone in their little corner of fabrication and deceit.

And they were. No one else was around.

…Perhaps beneath the desk? Odd choice, but it’d make for a good sneak attack.

Confused, Arty looked to the guards, knowing she hadn’t imagined it.

She wouldn’t say they looked unfazed. They hadn’t jumped damn near out of their own skins like she had, so words from the beyond probably weren’t unheard of—and hell, maybe that’s just how it was at Stark Tower—but they looked surprised enough that clearly The Voice did not speak to them often.

What the fu…

“I will escort her from here, thank you Ms. Duarte, Mr. Bryant.” The disembodied sound was borderline robotic and clear as a whistle, but not loud enough it passed beyond their bubble to disturb the wider vicinity.

At the guards’ 4 o’clock, a gleaming set of steel doors slid open without prompting, revealing an empty elevator.
“If you will take the elevator to your left please, Miss Thatcher.”

…Right.

Okay. Sure.

The Voice knew her name. And it wanted her to get into an elevator. Alone.

Uh-huh.

‘Gonna’ steal your kidney,’ said the increasingly large dumbass part of her that watched too many movies even though she knew no one was going to steal her kidney.

Arty looked at the guards, trying to glean a sense of guidance or reassurance that this was fine and a totally normal occurrence. Entirely unhelpful and seemingly just as surprised by the request as she herself was, the guards said nothing. What they did do was stare openly at her, looking her up and down and side to side as if trying to piece together who she was and just where she’d gotten her ‘authorization’.

She tried not to have a little fun imagining what they were thinking: was she a member with that spy-slash-semi-governmental agency whose existence had just been leaked to the public not a couple weeks ago? Another super powered individual, here for the weekly Hero meeting? A new specimen of tourist fresh off the assembly line? An escort? Arty felt her eye twitch and a small knot form in her stomach at the idea, but it shouldn’t have. Besides, escorts had way better fashion sense than she did.

After a moment of supremely awkward three-and-a-half-way silence, the bun-headed woman pasted a professional smile on her face and cleared her throat, indicating the elevator with a tilt of her head.

“Go right ahead, Miss,” she prompted.

The metal doors were still wide open, long after they’d have closed for any normal lift.

Well, whether she understood or not was immaterial. This was what she’d wanted, right? A way upstairs? Even if it ultimately led to some creepy interrogation room and one less kidney, it still technically put her closer to her conscience-clearing than she’d be if she walked out right now.

Arty was at least that brave…and if she died of infection from botched surgery it wouldn’t be her problem anymore.

Mind set, Arty stepped around the desk and into the elevator, sending a small ‘thank you’ nod to the two manning it. The doors remained open until she was situated against the far wall, then slid shut with barely a sound.

“Take me to your leader…” Arty whispered under her breath, hands gripping the rail and nails drumming nervously against the cool cylindrical metal.

With the slightest movement, the elevator unlocked and began to move, taking her up at a steady pace. There were no windows, so she occupied her time watching the monitor and trying not to recognize her unusually fast breathing or the fact this was really happening, she was really doing this.

It was quiet, save for the ping of her tapping nails and the muted, mechanical hum of the elevator itself. So quiet, in fact, she damn near jumped out of her skin a second time when the air around her was once again filled.

“Unfortunate weather out today, is it not?”
The Voice had followed her. Guess that meant there wasn’t some lucky bastard on Stark Industries’ payroll as ‘Front Desk Spook, Part Time Only’—which was a shame. It would’ve made a cool summer gig in another life. Excellent on a resume.

Still, she didn’t know what to say around her confusion except, “Uhhm…”

Her disembodied friend took no umbrage with her confusion as they climbed, supplying: “I understand that a crisp 61 degrees Fahrenheit is agreeable to most, but in light of the previous weeks’ sun, I do believe some might label it ‘gloomy’.”

Without the noise of the busy lobby at the back of her mind, Arty could make out the English accent lacing the dulcet tones. But still, beneath that, an almost automated sound; something that seemed just so slightly off. Either someone was hired to sit in a room and make idle conversation through a voice filter—in which case they’d really missed an opportunity to go full Vader—or the person with whom she was speaking was not quite human. A program, perhaps? Some kind of security system? Arty could vaguely recall her Mate yelling out some kind of verbal command the day he’d almost trapped her inside Human Resources: was this who he’d been talking to?

Arty shifted. Either way, he seemed nice enough and she had plenty of manners to go around. Human or not, it felt rude to leave him hanging. “Uh, yeah. Gloomy seems about right…I personally need a jacket for anything below 75.” Which was probably just her California blood. It seemed weird to leave it at that, so she continued as they passed Floor 14. “And yourself? Do cloudy days…put a damper on your spirit?”

“I cannot say I’ve found the weather to have any noticeable impact on my functions as of yet.”

“Oh. Well that’s good.”

“Quite, and it is kind of you to inquire, Miss Thatcher.”

‘Miss Thatcher’. Somehow him--it? Him?--knowing her name was less unnerving and weird than the fact she hadn’t been called that since highschool.

And “kind of you to inquire”? He said that as if people didn’t often engage him in discussion. Now, Arty hadn’t expected Channel 2 Weather Talk when she prepped herself this morning, and despite the fact he was taking her somewhere arguably risky and may or may not be of corporeal form and still knew her name, she couldn’t imagine anyone ignoring him outright when his conduct was so…soothing. Assholes.

She was about to respond when her metal cage slowed to a stop, indicating Floor 19, and he beat her to the punch.

“There will be a door ten meters to your left, Miss, if you will kindly take it.”

“Sure, yeah. No problem.” What else was she going to do?

The doors did not open right away, even though she was close enough she could’ve bopped them with her nose if she leaned forward. She poked them. Nothing. She waved a hand in front of them, and still nothing. Just as she was contemplating the emergency release button, they finally slid open to release her into an empty hallway. Well, almost empty. Once out, she spied the form of a suited man a ways away, retreating from her direction and talking on his cell as though the Voice had wanted him to pass by her first.

Arty took note of that.
Even after the man disappeared for good down another hallway, Arty moved silently, padding down the area of smooth, bare grey walls before she came to the aforementioned door. It was unlabeled, but it bore a complicated electronic keypad and a flashing red light beside the handle. It didn’t seem right, but she tried it anyways. No dice. Was this the wrong door? Arty was the product of American schooling; meters were unfortunately not her forte. She was just about to move on to try the next in sight when the door whirred a motorized hum and the light turned solid green, swinging inward a few inches on its own.

Okay. That was kind of sweet.

“Thank you,” Arty whispered out loud, hoping the Voice could hear her as she slid on through and closed the heavy metal behind her.

As she beheld the room beyond the super secret pin-locked door, Arty couldn’t help but think this was turning into a rather intriguing journey. With large stone pillars, a two-way staircase, and yet another elevator, the room felt less a room and more part of a covert series of passageways reserved for restricted access only. Combined with the distinct feeling the Voice had her sneaking around, Arty was feeling more and more part hooker, part spy with every passing second. If it weren’t overcast she would’ve had sunglasses to complete the look. Despite her best efforts to remain goal-oriented, she could hear the Mission Impossible theme in her head.

‘Stop it,’ she commanded the humming. She had a mission, after all. A mission…no, stop.

Arty shook her head.

Was she taking the stairs, or this new elevator? Or were the black market surgeons going to bust in and drug her ass right here?

The Voice seemed to read her thoughts even as they came to her and the new set of doors slid open as invitingly as the previous pair. Unlike the lift she’d just vacated, however, this one was markedly different. For starters, it was roomier and clearly built more along the lines of luxury; it had swapped the drab metal walls for a series of maroon-ish, russet tiles that provided an elegant backdrop to the golden rails and marble floor. A flaxen colored light emanated from both the lining of the ceiling and that near the floor, providing the whole lift with a warm interior as the glow complimented the dark, brick red.

All in all, the hue of the design was familiar, and led her to believe she knew exactly whose it was.

A little reluctant, Arty stepped inside and turned to face the closing doors, backing up and leaning into the wall for support—both mental and physical. The lift she’d taken with Brit had been spacious and sleek, widely meant for public and staff use, all glass and steel with a carpeted floor and fair view of the city; the one behind the information desk had been all metal and hard greys and purpose, probably strictly for function and security use only; the set up and location of the one she now occupied only led Arty to the conclusion that this had to be a—the—Private Elevator.

With all the subtlety of a wrecking ball, Arty found the fun of her clandestine little jaunt buried. Her hands shook. So much for all her prep work.

While the elegant lift made its ascent, climbing so smoothly she would’ve questioned whether they were moving at all were it not for the changing numbers on display, Arty pressed more of her weight onto the railing, feeling it dig into her lower back pointedly. The heel of her foot bounced rapidly, her chest felt tight.

She was doing the right thing and she knew it. It wasn’t easy, but it was right.
And it would be over soon enough.

Arty just had to get through the next couple of hours.

Foot bouncing with greater urgency, counting the passing seconds with each breath as she passed the 50th Floor, Arty just hoped her Mate would be satisfied with her answers and leave it at that.

There were some out there, groups and individuals both, who’d say she didn’t even need to give him an answer. They’d say that people weren’t necessarily entitled to an explanation of a Soulmate’s choice, if that choice was to pass them by Mate entirely. There were whole theories and doctrine that had been around for centuries on the topic, both for and against the position; there were entire sections of law born and dedicated to the practice of disputed inter-and-intra relations among Soulmates, or between Soulmates and third parties.

Arty’s own upbringing had left her uniquely positioned not to develop opinions on any of them, because developing opinions meant thinking about Soulmates to begin with, which led to thinking about her own somewhere out there, and what that might mean for her sanity, and that meant thinking about what that would mean for her, and that was just dangerous territory. Whether or not a Mate deserved an explanation was a debate best left to philosophers and those who held the designs of fate close to heart or even those who thought the whole system a product of random interference. As a member of the human race who’d seen the effects of a Soulbonds up close, both when they were at their height and when they’d been violently ripped apart, Arty grasped enough of her place in the equation to know they were anything but inconsequential. But if she didn’t endeavor to solidify her stance otherwise, she wouldn’t risk getting in too deep and wouldn’t risk the inevitability of realizing there were some things people just didn’t have the strength to be free of.

Ignorance was bliss.

But for his sake…

Hopefully the truth would be enough—be enough for him to know the problem wasn’t with him, definitely wasn’t with him, and be enough to spare him from developing a complex about it. He’d quickly realize she never could’ve lived up to his standards anyways and would go on saving the world, and Arty could go about her life without the crippling fear she’d endure the same fate of her mother. Or sister. Or grandfather.

Besides, how hard could it be? Soulmate or not, he had an ocean of better options.

First and foremost among them was Pepper Potts. What a woman! Strong and smart and business savvy and gorgeous, she was the whole package—and, from Marcos’ own account, a class act. Anyone would be lucky to have her. The woman had far more to bring to a relationship than Arty ever could. Besides, the two had known each other a long time, hadn’t they? There was obviously enough trust between them that Stark had handed her the reigns of his company, even when the press had derided the decision for months, and the tabloids always had a field day trying to link the two romantically. Whether Arty believed the rumors held a kernel of truth or didn’t was irrelevant: if she so chose, Ms. Potts would make Tony Stark a striking match.

Unfortunately, Arty was just herself.

...Actually, on second thought, this shouldn’t be too hard after all.

He was a smart guy. A verifiable genius. He knew his checks and balances. Once he rubbed the haze of the Soulmate situation from his mind, he’d see clear as day that he wanted nothing to do with her...right?
Right.

And she could not, under any circumstance, let him and those fathomless eyes of his get so close to her again or she’d be up the river without a paddle.

Plan in place, Arty let her head fall back and her eyes close, breathing deep.

Just a couple more hours and she could put this all behind her. A couple more hours and she’d never be troubled by it again. Hell, she’d even be working the bar later that night, and there was no better way to drive home her return to the mundane and typical than drunk ass men with wandering hands.

She shuddered.

Just a few more hours.

The elevator came to a gentle stop, and the floor steadied beneath her feet.

Arty squared her shoulders and opened her eyes, pushing off the railing, ready for whatever was about to be thrown at her.

When the doors slid open, so did her mouth.

_Damnnnnnnnnnn._

What a view.

The sprawling cityscape was nice too, she supposed, but her tiny mind was tripping over the sight of the penthouse itself. Because that was the only place she could be.

Open concept and huge to boot, the suite was magnificent. With its wide, airy space, high ceiling, and enormous swath of natural light, Arty temporarily forgot her worries, reveling in the fact she didn’t feel as though the walls were caving in around her. And speaking of walls—_god._ The sheer blend of textured surfaces, from rough-hewn stone to smooth, polished marble shouldn’t have worked, but it did. The combination of dark concrete surrounding a recess in the floor of soft, feathery-looking carpet shouldn’t have worked, but it did. The varied mix of light fixtures and furniture shouldn’t have worked, but it did. The room blended earthen elements and modern sentiments of industrial minimalism together seamlessly, designed in such a way for the eye to follow it from one feature to the next unhindered.

Arty had to fight the urge to whip out her phone and capture the interior with a number of photos that wouldn’t have done it justice anyways. There wasn’t a single Tony Stark in sight, but she would feel bad taking pictures of his home (correction, _one_ of his homes) without his permission. But she loved, loved, _loved_ architecture. The room was a marvel of it, the interior design flawless, so she did her best to commit it to memory instead. She _had_ to find out the name of the designer.

She crept forward a step, leaving the elevator for a better vantage point. The helicopter pad outside—because of course he had his own helicopter pad—led naturally to the half-level rise that rimmed the inside wall, which also led naturally to a fully-stocked bar, which in turn led to—

_“Fucking hell,”_ Arty jumped, hands halfway to her heart.

To her immediate right was a statue.

Of vaguely humanoid shape, the piece was sculpted from clay and cast in bronze. Abstract, with uncomfortably elongated limbs and no discernible features, the thing appeared to be, well, half-laying
and half-dangling from a tree limb, one leg extended to the horizon like it was about to kick a bitch in the face. Near the base of the work was a plaque reading: The Arboreal Man. It was a bold but entirely disconcerting piece of art that made Arty feel entirely justified in the ten steps she now took away from it.

If she’d left the lift sooner there was no way she could’ve missed it; the giant thing stuck out like a sore thumb and clearly had not been part of the layout when the room was set up. It didn’t mesh with the rest of the décor and, though she was loath to judge someone their taste in art, it just didn’t seem fitting.

Arty took another ten steps away from the sculpture, eyeing it like it was preparing for an attack…

…and felt the bottom drop out of her stomach when her foot buckled off the step she hadn’t seen and she damn near careened face-first into the floor. She managed to catch her balance just before she ate concrete, but barely.

‘Great’, Arty told herself. She makes one little attempt to clear a conscience and almost leaves him a corpse with a broken neck instead.

She should stay away from the sculpted man. And the stairs. While she was at it, she should stay away from all his fancy furniture, too. Arty had exactly zero disposable dollars to pay for property damage or an ambulance, so best to just stay away from everything in sight. She wasn’t clumsy by nature—was, in fact, quite the opposite—but fate had been sending an awful lot of “Fuck You’s” her direction lately and she wasn’t going to risk it—even if she was tempted to take a closer look at that wild-ass light fixture that looked like a wind turbine on acid.

Finding the largest swath of empty floor she could, Arty planted herself, stuck her hands in her pockets, and waited.

Not a minute later and Arty felt her heart jump in her throat for the third time as The Voice returned.

“I apologize for the wait, Miss Thatcher. Mr. Stark will be with you momentarily. Please do make yourself comfortable in the meantime.”

Comfortable. Yeah right. On what? On the $20,000 couch? On the $40,000 chaise lounge? She’d break something. Or scratch the material. If it had a price tag higher than an IKEA bookshelf, there was too much risk. Arty was much safer standing where she was, thanks, no doubt fate would find some way to—

Momentarily.

He would be with her “momentarily”.


Her stomach flipped, but this was it. This was it. Time to put on her game face and not let any pair of earthly brown eyes snatch it away.

Game time, game time, ga—

“Are you quite alright, Miss Thatcher? I’ve detected a sudden elevation in your heart rate.”

“Ex-excuse me?” He’d done what now?

“Your resting heart rate appears to have risen drastically. Are you feeling well?”
No. And certainly not after that comment. Heat filled her face. “I’m feeling fine, thank you. Uh, no need to worry.”

“Are you certain? Perhaps if you’d like to take a seat—”

“Nope, I’m good! Perfectly fine,” Arty lied, voice unnaturally high. This was not helping.

“I see... would you then care for some refreshments? I can arrange to have anything you wish brought up.”

Opening her mouth to say thanks but no thanks, and also what the fuck, she was beaten to the punch.

“That’s JARVIS.”

Arty spun around.

Tony Stark was there all right, standing beneath the wide arch of a door she hadn’t noticed on the far side of the room, a small grey towel in his hands. If he was surprised to see her, was caught unawares by her presence in any way whatsoever, he didn’t show it.

Welp. That was one card taken from her deck already. Damn.

Aaaand if he’d heard any of that conversation, she was at a further disadvantage. Double damn.

The dark-haired man moved, taking a step into the larger room. Not good. He took another step, closing the distance. Really not good.

Arty needed to say something, and fast, before he got too close and she found herself holding a losing hand.

Of course, with her genius fish-brain, the only thing that left her mouth was:

“...Hi.”

Really. Really? Of all the dozen, creative things she’d come up with, they chose now of all times to flip their ‘Out to Lunch’ signs? God.

He wasn’t fazed.

“Hi,” he said right back, tone more than a tad playful and eyes twinkling as they beheld her.

Because now he was close enough she could see the twinkle in his eyes. And the wrinkle of a smirk just waiting to spring forth.

Jesus.

Christ.

Either he had the hidden stride of an Ent, or she had the poor concept of time of one, because the benefit of distance was a battle long lost.

Absolutely fantastic. A Triple Damn to add to her growing collection.

Arty was glad her hands were in pockets, otherwise he might see them shaking.

’Say something, idiot. Before he can.’
“Hi…” she said again, vaguely aware she was repeating herself. Maybe if she just threw words at him something worthwhile would come out eventually. Which was ridiculous in and of itself, because she made part of her living being articulate. “I wanted to uh—well, actually, I was hoping I’d be able to see you, to you know—see if you were available to…talk?” She leaned a little harder on her right side, grateful beyond measure he’d finally come to a stop some six or seven feet away. “I know I didn’t give you a heads up, or…”

She trailed off. Now that he was this close, a few things were jumping out at her. Like the fact that this time, though he wasn’t dressed too dissimilar to the casual look he’d donned the day before yesterday—dark wash jeans and a long sleeve shirt rolled to the elbows, a well-worn AC/DC tee thrown on top this go round—he was an absolute mess. His hair was tussled in a way very unlike any she’d seen in his public appearances, and splattered across his person were dark oil stains, marking everything from his shoes to his neck, and she suddenly realized that the grey towel he held was not, in fact, grey. It had been white in a previous life, but was now so streaked with the grease he was attempting to work off his hands that no amount of industrial cleaner could bring it back to its original state.

He’d clearly been in the middle of something, and she’d interrupted.

The Dumb Bitch Award really was hers, and hers alone.

“Shit,” came out of her first. “I’m so, so sorry, I didn’t realize you were busy.”

Arty took a step back and away from him quickly. Man might’ve been building some frickin’ world-saving device for all she knew and she’d gone and broken his stride. “Really, I should’ve called or texted or something, let you know I was coming—”

At the next opportunity, she was buying a day planner and writing ‘Slam Head Against Wall, 7pm’ every day for the rest of her life. But for the next few seconds, she really had to focus on anything but the grey oil smudge on his neck that he’d clearly tried, and failed, to wipe away, and the fact that it was kind of distracting and kind of cute and incredibly humanizing and that it made her eye naturally follow its end to a jawline so sharp a god would’ve been envious and that it turn brought her back to the smirk-and-eyes Ultimate Hit because she did not want to have to deal with that, wouldn’t have had to deal with it at all if she hadn’t insisted on being a “good person”.

Overall, this was terrible, and she hated herself.

“—you know what? Don’t mind me. I can just come back another time—be out of your hair and all that,” she moved to step around him, aiming for the elevator. “In fact, in a minute you’ll never even know I was here.”

The amusement dropped from his eyes like a bulb going out. He held up his hands quickly in a hold-your-horses way, stepping just to the side of her path. Not enough to block her escape, but enough she got the hint and hesitated. “Woah there, no need to go a-runnin’,” he quipped, caution intermingling with charm. “You didn’t interrupt a thing…except perhaps my avoidance of the mayor.”

A joke, but it made it worse. Arty shook her head stubbornly, eyeing the floor in preparation to take another step. “No, no, really, I can just do any other old time, or no time at all, even, I don’t wanna’ be an inconvenience—”

“Nonsense,” he cut in firmly. “You’re not an inconvenience.” She tried not to let a feeling about the way he said it get the best of her. “Besides,” he started again, tone miles lighter, “if you leave, you’ll be taking all genuine excuses to avoid a mountain of official work with you. I might die at my desk.
signing paperwork and lose all my street cred…can’t have that now, can we?”

Arty hesitated.

“Really,” he said after a moment, voice dropping in depth; it was that same low tone he’d used on her in the apartment, the one that made her mind go all fuzzy. “I’d…prefer it if you stayed.”

Arty made the mistake of looking him in the eyes.

A big mistake. Huge.

Quicksand had to be somewhere back in his ancestral line, because for every bit she struggled trying to escape, trying to claw her way out of his gaze, she was dragged and sunk that much deeper.

‘1-800-LORD-HELP-ME’, she thought.

“Oh…okay then.” Her voice sounded annoyingly small. “Anyways, I was uh, hoping that I’d be able to explain some things.”

The bulb came back on, first sign of surprise lighting his eyes. While her vindictive brain pumped a fist in the air, her survivalist brain panicked, telling her to cover her tracks.

“I mean, that is, if you still want me to!” Arty provided. “Because you might not want me to now, or—er—ever, I suppose, totally up to you, you’re hardly obligated to listen to anything I have to say. Not that anyone is obligated really, I mean no one has to do anything, technically speaking, we do still have free will despite what the ad companies keep trying to sell, I just mean—”

Arty cut her own damn self off, taking a whale-sized breath.

She was not a rambler, this was bullshit.

Though she cut herself some slack, because the man had all the gravitic pull of a damn Super-planet and then some, especially with the stupidly captivating little eye crinkles, it just wouldn’t do.


If she was to come out the other side of this with dignity intact, she needed to find a way of reframing the situation so it didn’t scare the daylights out of her.

‘C’mon brain, reframe,’ she insisted. ‘Reframe, reframe, reframe.’

Aha!

Neither the situation nor potentially embarrassing herself should scare the daylights out of her, because it wasn’t like any of this was going to have an impact beyond today. She needn’t worry of looking like a dolt or oversharing because there was no future between them in which it would come back to haunt her. She needn’t worry about making a fool of herself in front of Tony Stark because—remember, remember—he was going to forget all about her after she made a mongoose seem like a more viable Soulmate. If she’d said the last thought out loud, Brit would’ve rolled her eyes at the exaggeration, but it was what Arty needed to tell herself.

So there.

She felt so much better now, she could almost breathe easy.

Arty would never see him again, consequences seemed frivolous, and she was good to go. She
didn’t even feel all that guilty committing the shades of his earthen eyes to memory.

‘Liar,’ said that voice deep inside her. Arty threw a blanket over it.

“What I mean to say is: I would like to explain some things.” Her voice was strong, confident. “To you. About me. About...why I ran.” She didn’t even give him time to respond, unable to ignore the looming figure out of the corner of her eye. “Just, if we could talk...maybe somewhere else? I don’t know how much I can get out with your Arboreal Man lookin’ like he’s gearing up for a roundhouse.”

He blinked. Was probably still trying to filter through her previous word vomit for something intelligible.

Eventually, he turned to follow her gaze, staring at the statue. When he turned round once again, it was with a peculiar smile on his face, as though she’d missed the punchline to some joke.

After a great many moments of watching the wheels spin behind his eyes, he stood a little taller and indicated the elevator with a tilt of the head. “You hungry? I was just about to grab a bite—I’ve got the best Fry Guy around.”

Arty considered that.

She was hungry. She’d skipped breakfast when her nerves refused to let up, not fond of the idea of providing her rolling stomach anything that might not stay down. It was biting her in the ass now, though. Her shaking hands, the lightheadedness: they could only be the result of low blood sugar. Definitely nothing else.

Anyways, she’d be a rotten friend if she turned the offer down. Brit treasured fries like parents did offspring, and if she found out Arty’d passed up the chance to try an Iron Man-Certified Fry Guy the redhead would kill her and dump her body in the Hudson.

“Starving, actually.”

He smiled, a hint of relief clear in his shoulders, before waving an open-armed invitation toward the lift once more, stepping back and giving her a wide berth to go first. She accepted, glad her legs still knew how to do their job as she crossed the lounge and reentered the metal box, watching as he gave the motor oil staining his hands one last rub before tossing the rag onto the expensive couch without a second thought and following her inside.

It wasn’t until the doors shut behind them and she realized she had effectively trapped herself in an inescapably small space with him for a minimum of way-too-long-regardless, that Arty came to the conclusion it maybe wouldn’t have been so bad if the sculpture had succeeded in kicking her off the tower after all.

*

The funny thing was, Tony hated that statue.

With a passion.

It’d been one of the breakout pieces of an up-and-coming artist a few years back, displayed at a charity event here in New York that he’d attended with Rhodey and Pepper before the whole ‘abduction’ thing. It’d been just as disconcerting back then, was even disliked by Pepper who had a higher appreciation for more abstract art, but it’s effect on him was nothing compared to the barely-concealed squeaks and ‘I hate that thing’-s Rhodey mumbled under his breath every time he beheld
the sculpture anew; the gala was such a maze they’d gotten lost and doubled back at least four times.

Apparently, it was found just as unappealing in the long term by other patrons as well, because the Arboreal Man never left the city; instead, it was just passed along from studio to studio, collector to collector in place of a permanent residence. Then, during the Wacky Alien Invasion exactly one month ago to the day, its home-of-the-year had been devastated by one of those Wacky Alien Whales. It was one of the few surviving pieces from the exhibit.

So, as one did, Tony saw his chance and bought it up with plans to have it delivered directly to Rhodey’s front door.

They had a long-standing tradition of prank-pulling, and Rhodey was overdue for a good one—Tony just wanted to be there to see it. What Tony hadn’t anticipated was meeting the one before him not two days after its purchase. With his mind now so occupied, he hadn’t bothered to figure out just when he was going to go through with his annual need to terrify the Colonel.

Now, instead of scaring the shit out of Rhodey as per the plan, it was chilling in the lounge area and scaring the shit out of Tony every single day. If he were in the habit of wearing the suit to sleep he would’ve blown the damn thing apart days ago, what for the fright it gave him every time he wandered into the foyer at night in pursuit of peace from his definitely-not-nightmares.

But now that it’d gotten him here, in an elevator across from his Mate where the color of the walls made her eyes pop something fierce, he found he didn’t mind it so much.

Or at all.

He had been shocked to say the least when JARVIS had interrupted his regularly scheduled session of self-loathing and needless tinkering of the Mark VII to inform him that the focus of his whirlwind thoughts was not only here, in his Tower, but was, in fact, well on her way to his personal living quarters.

If JARVIS told anyone Tony’s hands had fumbled enough he dropped the dish of freshly-oiled pieces DUM-E’d been trying to hand him, splattering himself and the bot and the workstation all in one, he’d call him a liar; and if JARVIS told anyone he had practically tripped over a box of ordered parts on his haste to reach the lift, he might have to seriously consider signing the AI up for Liars Anonymous.

And really Jarvis? The AI couldn’t have given him more of a warning than ‘I already took the liberty of escorting her to the penthouse’? Tony would’ve liked to at least get off some of the oil stains so he didn’t resemble some feral billionaire released into the wilds of a mechanics yard, thank you very much. But he wasn’t about to compromise his gain by making her wait—what if she left?

Tony couldn’t have that. Honestly, he thought he’d have to make the next move, never for a second considering she might be the one to come to him.

But she had. She was here.

She’d come to him. That thing beating in his chest at two hundred miles per hour was having fun reminding him of that as he looked at her, looking at him, looking at him looking at her and wondering just how much he should prepare himself for the worst.

He didn’t even know what the worst might be, but gnawing anxiety was telling him he should prepare nonetheless. Despite what she’d said before, it had to be something to do with him and she was just trying to be nice. He had too many shortcomings for it to be anything but.
While Tony mused on the specifics of why he was probably about to be bombarded with a laundry list of every reason she wanted nothing to do with him, his Mate shifted against the opposite railing, uncrossing her ankles and recrossing them in reverse. The small movement caused a shift in her shoulders as she adjusted her weight. She had her hair in a loose braid again, same as the day they’d met, and it caught the light now with her movement, practically glowing under the warm light.

Eyes flickering all across his face, reshuffling her feet once more as she met his scrutiny, Tony watched as his Mate reached out and rapped her knuckles against the wall, sending a dull ting through the air. Probably just desperate to break the quiet.

“I see you’ve uh, cornered the market on the red and gold cocktail,” she said conversationally, eyes betraying her need to lighten the air.

Tony eyed the arrangement fondly, mouth quirking at the distraction. “Trademarked it, actually,” he joked. “But only the combination of certain shades, if we want to get specific.”

“Ah,” she hummed. “So if any of the rest of us plebeians were to use, say,” she waved a hand lazily in thought, “cardinal and…medallion?”

“My lawyers are legally within their right to shoot on sight, yes,” he said lightly, eyes peeled for her reaction.

Her mouth twitched. She looked at the floor desperately to cover her tracks, trying not to let him linger on the hint of a smile. When she looked back at him it was with lively cheeks, and Tony felt an odd sort of warmth settle into him, chest swelling a little with pride that he’d been able to do that.

“Gods help the 49ers and every other college sports team in the USA, then.”

“Eh,” he responded airily. “They’re little fish, not worth the trouble. It’s Santa who should be worried—my lawyers have been trying to hand him a subpoena to get that sleigh out of commission for two years now. Can never seem to track him down.”

“Hmm—funny how that works,” she carried on, eyes dancing with amusement.

Tony quirked a brow at her. “Laugh it up while you can, Artemis,” he teased, “but there can only be one ridiculously wealthy guy in a red suit flying these skies, and I don’t intend it to be him.”

Her painfully blue eyes widened in mock surprise. “Oh? And here I’d heard competition was the lifeblood of our economy.”

Tony waved it off dramatically. “Lies,” he said simply. “The jolly bastard’s days in the field are numbered.”

And this time she couldn’t kill the smile.

She couldn’t conceal the way it worked itself from the inside out like the sun breaking for dawn, couldn’t fully mask the little half-sniff of a laugh she attempted to suppress as he got a glimpse of the girl he’d first seen in the HR lobby. For all she couldn’t subdue the moment, the luminous expression jabbed him unnecessarily hard in the ribs.

The moment lasted for all of a second, maybe two, before she caught herself red-handed and dropped the smile, crossing her arms for comfort as though that negated the pink dusting her cheeks. She broke eye contact with him.

Another jab to the ribs, this one far less pleasant. Was the elevator always this cold?
When she finally looked back to him, it wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been. Her bemusement was still there, just more contained. Visible, but only through layers of barbed wire.

Tony tried not to let the disappointment simmer; it would do him no good to take a beating if he wasn’t focused. Instead, he dedicated himself to thinking of another way to make her laugh.

When nothing immediately came to mind, JAY’s voice was a welcome reprieve.

“Pardon the intrusion Sir, Miss Thatcher, but Mr. Lamar wishes to know if you will be dining in the communal area, or if you’d prefer your order delivered.”

Tony watched his Mate as JARVIS spoke, saw the spark of panic at the words “communal area”. She needn’t have worried—he had no plans to take her there after all, never ate there himself, but he noted her aversion to being seen publicly. Publicly with him, anyways.

“Negative, JAY-man. Have him send it to the rec-room, will you?”

“Certainly, Sir.”

Minus the panic, he didn’t miss the curiosity in her haunting eyes, in the way they flickered about the ceiling as though she were looking for a camera or any sort of visible surveillance system. She clearly had questions on the tip of her tongue but was struggling with the conviction to ask them.

He waited, knowing they would come eventually.

She shifted her primary weight from one foot to the other, working past her discomfort. “Is he, uh—well, I don’t want to don’t want to be insensitive, I was just curious, but is he, your friend, Jarnis—”

Tony smiled and supplied, “JARVIS.”

“Sorry, JARVIS,” she blushed, “well he’s not, entirely…human?”

Tony’s grin grew. “No,” he said, enjoying the way she was clearly trying to word it so as not to sound to seem rude. “No, he’s not.”

“Right,” she said, somehow sounding not at all surprised and even as if it solved a few mysteries. “So then he’s a…?” Allowing the question to drop off like she did opened the question for an answer without having to put the wrong thing in her mouth. Smart.

“You needn’t worry of offending me, Miss Thatcher, as you are quite correct. I am a program.”

The fire was back in her eyes. “Amazing,” she whispered, true wonder sweeping her face as she looked between man and, well, ceiling. Then she started, suddenly aware she’d said that out loud. “Oh! I don’t mean ‘amazing’, like you can’t hear me or anything, I mean, clearly you can, I just mean…that’s amazing. You’re amazing. Er, wow, this probably seems extremely cavalier of me, I don’t mean to—”

She babbled on, completely unaware that Tony was committing every single facet of this to memory. JARVIS never got this warm a reception. His very existence tended to make most who knew of him uncomfortable—even Pep and Happy had been wary of him at first, treating the AI like some unseen ghost to be handled with caution. They’d grown out of it of course, and Rhodey had known JAY since his birth, for lack of a better term, but the rest tended to tiptoe around dealing with him.

“—well, I guess what I really mean to say is…it’s very nice to meet you, JARVIS.”
She smiled shyly at the ceiling. JARVIS wasn’t in the ceiling, but Tony was having too much fun to let her know that right now.

“I assure you the pleasure is all mine, Miss Thatcher. I have looked forward to meeting you for some time.”

Well, now. JAY was certainly putting his best foot forward. Tony thought the elevator had been running a little slow.

The blonde didn’t try to hide her surprise. “Um…you…have?”

“Of course. It is not everyday I get to meet the Soulmate of my Creator.”

Her eyes flickered to Tony, and she was silent.

JARVIS continued. “The phenomenon of being able to identify one’s Soulmate is one with which I have found myself fascinated. I have dedicated numerous subroutines to studying the matter, and I must confess a profound interest in the concept of a predetermined entity. Especially when it comes to the life of he whom brought me into being.”

“…I see.” She did not elaborate, but it was clear JAY was straying down a path she was uncomfortable with.

To his credit, the AI seemed to pick up on that and chose a new avenue of discussion.

“I would like to extend my sincerest apologies for Mr. Stark’s behavior.”

Wait.

He what now?

“I aspired to have him return your footwear sooner, and consider the fault mine for not having succeeded.”

‘Oh sure, JAY, way to make yourself look good in front of the pretty girl,’ Tony thought dejectedly.

She squirmed on the other side of the elevator, but was grateful for the turn of conversation. “Ah… s’okay. I had other footwear.”

“I would also like to say that, had I known of his intentions to physically intercept you, I would have advised against it—”

“Hey,” Tony protested, suddenly none too happy with the turn this had taken.

“—but let me assure you, it was an action of which Mr. Stark does not make a habit.”

The elevator stopped just in time, and the doors slid open to reveal a wide space moderately populated with cloth-covered furniture and other amenities.

Originally intended to be solely for recreational use, the floor had gone through a number of changes in the past few weeks and was currently in a state of limbo. Tony’d needed to reshuffle and repurpose some of the upper levels after he started working on special designs for the rest of the A-Team, and this one was currently functioning as pseudo-storage until he finalized where everything would end up. It contained all of its original belongings, such as the game tables and luxuriously comfy sofas and larger than life flat screen TV’s, but it also now held random engineering equipment and crate upon crate of hardware and appliances that would eventually be allocated upstairs.
Tony was working off the theory the *Arboreal Man* hadn’t been the only thing making her uncomfortable upstairs, standing the way she’d been with her arms pulled in tight and posture stiff, like she was afraid to move away from the window. His fancy digs were probably a far cry from what she was used to.

Hopefully, here, she would feel more at ease.

It was safe from the hazards of floors still under construction, disorderly enough in its chaos, and it was private.

“Right, I think that’s enough out of you, thanks JAY,” Tony said dryly. He wasn’t interested in playing Russian Roulette with conversational topics.

Once out in the lobby, where the AI had already lit the interior and the rest of the room was illuminated by natural light from the windows, they both hovered awkwardly.

What did he say? *Please, confirm all my insecurities at your own pace, but show mercy I don’t deserve and do it gently?*

Nah. Too pitiful. Too lengthy.

He could stall for time, try and wrangle a few more not-smiles and not-laughs from her, get her to forget whatever JARVIS had been trying to do to his already-weak standing.

Tony was saved by the bell—literally. A pleasant, three-note chime broke the air, signaling the arrival of both their food and his chance to squeeze in a few dozen steadying breaths without her noticing.

Tony pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the sound—luckily his Stark-grade version of a dumbwaiter was a fair bit away—made sure she didn’t seem likely to disappear on him, and muttered a quick “be right back” as he set off to retrieve the order.

The second he was out of earshot, Tony whisper-grumbled to the AI. “What the hell was that, JAY?”

“To what are you referring to, Sir?”

Came the not-entirely convincing innocence JARVIS was trying to convey through the earpiece.

“Were you preening? I don’t pay you to preen.”

“You don’t pay me at all, Sir,” he pointed out. “I was simply endeavoring to make a positive first impression...to, for shortage of the proper parlance, make up for your lack of one.”

Tony slowed to a stop before the fancy dumbwaiter, glaring. “What’s that supposed to mean?” He knew what it was supposed to mean.

“According to my studies of typical human behavior and the progression of social groupings, it is vital to start off on the “right foot” when folding a new member into the family dynamic,” he said perfunctorily. “I promised DUM-E I would do my best to impress Miss Artemis, so the likelihood of her returning increases.”

It took everything he had not to slam his head into the wall. He placed a hand on it instead, steadying himself and trying not to focus on ninety percent of what JAY’d just said.

“You told DUM-E?” Aside from knowing the basics, that there was someone whom Tony had
encountered and was trying to “figure out”, Dum’s had been told nothing else. Or so he thought. Tony’d been specifically avoiding telling him or his brother anything more until he knew more himself—there was no point in setting expectations.

“Of course. He and U have noted the disruption in your sleeping patterns and were concerned for your health. I explained the truth,” he said. “They are very excited to meet her.”

“Great,” Tony exhaled forcefully, opening the hatch and grabbing the container, closing the hatch again. As if he needed yet another reason not to blow this—he couldn’t very well go and disappoint the bots. But when all was said and done, she’d still come to him. He clung to that like a buoy in a storm. It was a good sign. A, dare he say it, hopeful sign. But he couldn’t get ahead of himself. “And way to make me look good, JARVIS.”

“Sir?”

“Wanting her to come back is kind of a moot point if you make me look like a shoe-hoarding schmuck in the process.” That was exactly what he’d been for nearly two weeks, but who needed to admit it?

JARVIS was silent a beat. “…Your point is duly noted. I will be more discreet.”

“Discreet, sure—and I suppose the elevator decided to run at half speed all on it’s own, right buddy?” Tony was just needling him at this point.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir.”

He smiled.

When he returned with the food it was to find her running a hand along the polished wooden rails of the half-covered pool table, fingers gliding across the open, smooth surface. She hadn’t seemed to register his return yet, and Tony took a moment to digest her expression: though mostly guarded, it was vulnerable enough he could detect trace amounts of...fondness?

He cleared his throat, nodding at the table when she looked at him. “Do you play?”

She considered that. “Not really—not for a long time, anyways. But I remember the basics.”

Tony stepped closer, thinking. The air was palpable and he’d do anything to break it. After a moment he indicated the racked cue sticks to their left with his head. “Do you wanna’...?”

Apparently he wasn’t the only one who’d feel better with something to keep the hands busy, because she answered the unfinished question almost immediately. “Sure. As long as you don’t expect too much competition, s’been years since I’ve playe—.”

She was cut off by a suddenly persistent, low growl coming from her stomach. Blood rushing to her face, she made a strangled sound of embarrassment, expression twitching rapidly.

Tony wouldn’t say he was delighted by her look of distress as her belly growled again, but he was delighted.

He held in a laugh, hefting the container. Slipping a finger under one of the flaps to pop open the box, Tony stepped even closer, perhaps a tad closer than was really necessary, and held it out. The warm, fresh, delicious scent of herb-and-feta tossed fries wafted up. She reached out, then hesitated like it was a trap. Tony wiggled his eyebrows in invitation, fighting a smirk when her blush deepened five shades further. Hunger beating out fear, she reached out gingerly yet again.
She really shouldn’t have treated it like a trap though, because that gave him the idea to make it one.

Her fingers were almost there, a mere hairs breadth from a deep-fried piece of crispy heaven, so, so close…when Tony snapped one of the flaps down with his thumb, cardboard slapping against her hand playfully with a light *putt*.

She jumped, clutching her chest and smothering a quick “Jesus” in surprise. But skittish laughter broke through a moment later, adrenaline-born smile out of her hands.

And just like that, the tension dissolved like it had never been there to begin with.

Outside, Tony frowned with constructed sincerity and shook his head in apology. “Hmm—my bad. Must’ve slipped.” Inside, he crowed with victory, basking in the warmth like a cat would bask in its favorite patch of sun.

Lively ocean eyes narrowing with mischief, she huffed lightly. “Uh-huh, that’s what they all say.” Eyes lit with the same challenge she’d had two days ago, she snatched a couple of fries before he could mess with her further, depositing them into her mouth with finality.

Relishing the defiance on her face with a smirk of his own, Tony devoured a handful of fries himself and handed her the container, moving off to the rack. He was running on a high and wasn’t interested in another up-close rendition of Realizing She’d Done The Worst Possible Thing By Letting Her Guard Down.

Returning with his usual cue stick, he offered her a second he’d deemed appropriate for her height, waiting for her appraisal.

She took it, feeling the wood and testing the balance, before she nodded. “It’s good. Thanks.”

Balls already racked, Tony removed the triangle and extended his Mate the chance to break.

“Oh no,” she said, taking out another few fries before balancing the container on the wide rails. “All yours.”

Tony broke.

The balls scattered, solid and striped shades of every color spinning wildly on the green. The last of them were still coming to a rest when he straightened and asked, “Stripes or solids? Ladies choice.”

“…Solids.”

Huh. Tony liked the solids, too.

Reaching for the box and taking up another fry—they really were delicious—Tony watched while she went first, shooting for a solid black. Its path to the pocket was anything but seamless, wobbling like a newborn calf, but it made it in. She grimaced anyways, Tony reading the silent “yikes” that on her lips.

They played a few more turns, each nibbling at the fries when they passed that side of the table. Her technique was a little rusty, and her form a little off, but she had steady hands, solid aim, and great instincts for choosing which solid she wanted to bag next; all in all indicative of someone who might prove a dangerous opponent one day.

*
Yes.

Yes, this was much better.

At least she didn’t have to look at him while she explained.

The elevator had been a close call, she’d fully admit it—he had her going there, getting well under her skin. Amid the close space, Arty’d gotten a bit too caught up in the easy riffing and irresistible charm and commanding presence that seemed more akin to a black hole than a flesh and blood human. All it proved was that she had a pulse, but it was still far too precarious a balance for her liking.

And the teasing with the fry container?

Come on.

She was on the thinnest of fucking ice and it was melting with every second she found herself softening in his presence—one little smirk, one more of those thieving gazes might just be the final weight that sent her hurtling to an icy grave below.

Best to get it over with before she gave him that chance.

She downed two more fries, using them to fight past the lump in her throat and watched as the billionaire sunk two of his stripes in one go, before she was ready.

Cue ball still whirling lazily across the green, Arty cleared her throat.

“Listen,” she said, ripping off the Band-Aid, “since there’s no delicate way to put this I’m just gonna’ jump right to the point.”

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw him stiffen. She didn’t look him full-on, but she couldn’t not notice the rigidity in his spine as he straightened, setting his cue stick right side up and lacing his fingers on top it, and she couldn’t not notice the set of his shoulders that made it look like she was a flight attendant who’d just told him to brace for impact.

Arty took her turn, bending over to line up with one of her solids and wondering where she should start.

It wasn’t as if it was a hard story to tell—not anymore. She’d recounted it dozens and dozens of times, likely hundreds. Mostly to herself, and mostly to Johnni, and sometimes to Brit and a few of the other friends she’d been lucky enough to find and keep in her later years. Saying it out loud over and over had been one of the methods Johnni encouraged her to use. She said it would help with breaking down the confusion and the hurt and the instability of her upbringing, said it would help with the acknowledgment process of accepting what had been and what was, said that being able to verbally identify cause and effect would help her chip away at the apathy she’d wrapped herself in like a cloak to cope. Arty’d hated it at first, hated it for years, but now recounting it all was second nature.

And it wasn’t like she was ashamed or embarrassed of it, either. When she was younger, definitely. But with age came the understanding that everyone had their Thing—from the kids in the park to all the residents in retirement homes, everyone Had Their Shit. Had their trauma, had their demons, had their terrible shadow. Some had it worse than others, some had it slightly better, but everyone had it. Arty’d grown comfortable in her own headspace over the years knowing that, while she didn’t have the prettiest or most common of traumatic souvenirs, there were still countless people out there with realities far worse than hers. Sometimes her issues even seemed like small potatoes in comparison, so
she’d learned not to complain.

What’d happened, happened. She’d accepted it and just did her best to move forward.

Telling the same story she’d told a million times before shouldn’t be an obstacle, so why was she finding it hard now? Was she anticipatory of his reaction? It shouldn’t matter, because again, it would have no bearing past today. Or was she merely worried he would look at her the same way most people looked when they were confronted with something overtly personal and deep that they hadn’t signed up to listen to? That he would do the “nice thing” and look at her with pity, like she was less a person now than she was a result of her personal damage?

If there was one thing Arty hated it was pity. Hated it.

Should she really be worried though? The man had gone through enough Public Shit he should be pretty jaded. He’d been abducted for Christ’s sake, enduring who-the-hell-knew-what for three months. Had almost been killed numerous times. He’d fried bigger fish than her own domesticities.

But maybe she was just worried because, out of all the people she’d explained herself to, he was arguably the most important. Or at least the most relevant, being that he had a somewhat stake in this.

No one else had their words on her back.

Actually, on second thought, maybe she would prefer it if he took the traditional route of looking at her with sympathy and pity and all their descriptive cousins. She could live with that easier. She knew how to handle them, and it was to show them the door. She could only be so lucky.

Arty took a deep breath, and gathered all the vocal strength she could.

No going back now.

“When I ran away from you,” she began, steadying her cue stick along the rail, “it wasn’t because of you. At least, not because of You, you, as a person—I have nothing but respect for you, would even go so far as to admit I’m a fan of your…work.” She winced. “I don’t want you to think you’re at fault, because you’re not. This is my problem.”

Deep breaths. Deep, deep breaths.

“I have this…problem, you see. My association with the Soulmate thing in general is almost… emphatically negative. My experiences with it till now have led to more pain than gain”—more pain than anything, really—“and I ran from you out of panic. A uh, conditioned response, you might call it.” Her eyes flickered up, but climbed no higher than the grease mark on his neck before flickering back down. “For which, again, I apologize for any mixed signals I may have sent. It wasn’t personal.” Well, it kind of was, given the nature of the situation, but it wasn’t.

She shot. The cue collided perfectly with a solid red, sending it straight for the basket.

Arty’s foot bounced rapidly, hesitating as the rest came to a stop in her throat.

‘Deep breaths, kiddo,’ she could practically hear Johnni saying. ‘Deep breaths.’

She listened.

“My mother and her Mate had the perfect relationship. The fairytale romance, the once-in-a-lifetime connection everyone dreams about then denies having wanted when they’re older and tempered. But they had it. They really did,” she trailed off a little in thought, wondering what it must’ve been like,
then kept going. “The whole ‘No Problem Is Too Much, No Problem Too Big’ kind of thing. Not a thing in this universe could’ve kept them apart. It was all very storybook.

“What they had was…special. And enduring.”

Another deep breath.

“So naturally, as the universe does when people have too much of a good thing…he died. Car accident. Just out for a grocery run when some drunk driver jumped the curb and hit him head-on.”

Arty moved over two feet, eyeing the best vantage point for her next shot.

“The effect on my mom was…devastating, to say the least. Irreparable.” She sighed. “It’s astounding what the human body can withstand, you know? Between the denial, the narcosis, the depression”—not to mention the intentional starvation, the hysteria, the allocation of blame—“etcetera, etcetera, it’s pretty remarkable we organic life forms continue to function.”

Arty shrugged half-heartedly, leaning over with eyes on another solid. It was a pretty forest green, reminding her of the Redwood needles back home.

“Anyways…” she said after she shot and sunk again, “it wasn’t pretty. But that’s life.” She tapped the end of the stick into the ground lightly, before moving on.

“Mom got up after a while, tried her best—kids to live for and all that. And she really did try her best. For a good long while. Took all the medications the doctors prescribed and everything, all the anti-depressants” and anti-psychotics “and tried to manage.” Arty paused. “Some things just aren’t enough though…and after a few years her own daughters weren’t enough of a reason to keep going.”

She paced the length of the table, comparing the distance between the cue ball and two more solids, looking pointedly at anything but him.

It was all coming easier now, almost like she was back in Johnni’s office.

“It’s a hard sell, living entirely for someone else,” she said. “You’d think it was selfish the first time my mom tried to kill herself. Well, first couple of times, really.” Arty paused and exhaled with a huff. He hadn’t moved since she started, nor had he spoken. Risking a glance at him might let her know what he was thinking, but then she’d risk losing her mojo, so she continued. “I guess one of the milestones of reaching true adulthood is the realization that things are never as simple as a kid can make them out to be. Especially when it comes to matters of the,” she waved haphazardly, “‘Soul’, to contextualize it somewhat.

“Regardless, mom felt guilty after the first time”—she’d felt guilty after every time, or so Arty was told, it just always manifested in different ways—“and tried to, uh, how do I say this? Course correct. In an effort to find something that might fill the whole her Mate left, she started looking for a substitute.” Next target chosen, Arty bent over to perfect her aim, noting the stretch helped ease some of the remnants of tension.

“Unfortunately for her, and her kids by proxy, that meant a parade of increasingly terrible men—”

Some of whom hadn’t been all that bad, some of whom had despised the noise and burden of children, some of whom became a little too trigger-happy with the use of their back hands, and one of the earliest ones whom had led to an unforeseen and rather permanent consequence. Namely, in Arty herself.
“—they’d promise her the world and all the joys of life she’d had taken from her, and eventually we’d move in. The beau of the season never lasted longer than a few months, only until it became apparent he could never replace what she’d lost”—or until Sandy managed to talk the sense into their mother that no, black eyes were *not* signs of love—“so then we’d move along to the next fella. Rinse, cycle, repeat, yada yada, everyone knows this song and dance.”

They’d had to move more than that, too; sometimes the men her mother chose would be more than a little miffed that something they deemed theirs had just up and disappeared overnight. Sometimes, on more than one occasion, they’d come looking.

“Anyways,” Arty said, knocking the navy blue into the pocket, “after a few years my moms developing theory that Soulmates were the bane of all existence and that our family was cursed set in and became the standard we were raised by.” Well, it was the standard when she was most lucid.

“You see, my grandfather *also* lost his Mate too young. Grandma was a nurse, and she was covering the night shift for a friend when some drug addict hopped up on meth lost his mind and went at her with a knife. After that my mom said Grandpa lost his own damn mind and dumped her with his sister, unable to handle taking care of her without my grandmother. He disappeared after a while, and they heard after a few years that he’d drunk himself to death somewhere in South America—Peru, I think it was.

“It doesn’t matter how good a thing is,” Arty stressed, ‘Wise Words’ of her mother coming out full-force, “if it has the potential to cripple you from toes to forehead and strip you of everything you were before then it’s better off avoided altogether. Why drink the nectar of the gods when you’ll just be chasing it down with acid later? Mom always told us to never get involved, that if we ever met our Soulmates we were to run the other direction and never look back, otherwise we’d turn out just like her.”

It had been a truly warped display of her mother’s love that she saw that as the only lesson worth departing on her girls, but it was something. A hint that she might still be in there somewhere.

Arty shook her head, clearing the thought.

“So obviously, when my oldest sister met her own Mate right out of highschool, my mom lost another of her marbles and went ballistic.” Though she hadn’t succeeded, the renewed upheaval of it all had sent their mother into a fresh spiral of self-destruction and she’d tried to take her own life again. But there was no need to vocalize ground she’d already covered. “Didn’t want to meet him—Sean, great guy—didn’t want me or my other sister to meet him, didn’t want her eldest to have anything to do with him. Just wanted him gone, removed from the equation so she wouldn’t have a daughter hurt like she was.”

“As a naturally rebellious late-teen with years of resentment putting up with our mothers, uh, behavior”—and having been old enough to remember the good years of her parents’ own Bond —“my sister didn’t buy it. Who isn’t blinded by the invincibility of young love? Especially when that young love is from a Mate that encompasses all the joy and stability she never got from Mom? They were already head over heels, so they ignored my mother’s warnings and dove in headfirst. Got a tiny apartment together and everything.”

Arty left out the part that it’d been during this period that the fuzzy words on her own back started to come into focus, becoming more legible each day as Sandra’s slight brought renewed strain onto their mother.

She also left out the part where her mother’d finally snapped a bit too far and tried to kill Arty, too. Tried to save her by killing her. She was explaining herself just fine without having to reveal that much. It would be a wee bit too personal, right? Right.
Arty twirled the pool stick in her hand, feeling the weight and remembering when Sean had taught her how to play. Remembered many of the things he’d taught her when he and Sandra got custody of her and Leah.

A lifetime ago, it seemed.

She continued.

“‘My sister was determined to prove my mother wrong, was convinced that we weren’t cursed as a family and that the same thing wouldn’t happen to her, because what would be the odds?’”

The peanut gallery of one Tony Stark was still silent, for which she chose to be grateful rather than concerned.

Arty fought past a sniff, hanging onto her nonchalant tone.

“They had a good run. Saved up, bought a nice house, created my first bouncing baby niece. My sis even started her own small business, too. Best damn bakery-slash-gardening hotspot on the West Coast. They were all very happy.”

‘We were all very happy,’ she thought bitterly, surveying the table. Arty had sunk all of her solids, nothing left to shoot. She took a deep breath, and broke the rules by going straight for one of his stripes.

“Well…anyways. Sean was barely two weeks off paternity leave for my second niece when he died, too. He was a firefighter, see. And that year there’d been a small drought, and there was this big forest fire…” she trailed off, no point in finishing a sentence that finished itself.

Her thumb circled the smooth cylindrical surface of the cue stick, aiming for her opponents yellow stripe.

“My sister stopped being angry at my mother after that. She stopped being a lot of things—had to be hospitalized for months just to deal, went through her own circulation of meds”—had used those meds to make the one and only attempt on her own life—“went from being the most enthusiastic, most loving and confident person in my life to a ghost of herself.”

Sandra hadn’t gone down the rabbit hole like their mother had, but she’d gotten close. It was only the backdrop of their own childhoods that’d pulled her from the brink. Sandy recovered only so far as to provide a good life for Chlo’ and Elsie, keeping a supporting eye on Arty and Leah at the same time, but she left no room to begin with—the spark in Sandy had died along with Sean, and it was never coming back.

“Now she simply uh, goes through the motions of what life’s supposed to be like.” Arty went after his orange stripe, too. “Eating, sleeping, working, making sure the girls are cared for. All that good stuff. But she’s not really there.”

She quieted, nothing more really to say. It was definitely an odd place to leave off, but that was all the explanation he should need.

They were good now, right?

She looked for another stripe to sink, something to do where she wouldn’t have to look at him, but she’d sunken them all.

Arty would have to look at him at some point.
If the mighty Thor decided to show her favor—which was hilarious now knowing he was an actual thing—she’d find that particular human manner of perturbed disquiet, the ‘Yeah, I Don’t Want None Of That Baggage In My Life, I’m Just Struggling For A Way To Say It Without Sounding Like A Dick’ face.

Again, she could only be so fortunate.

When she finally managed to look at him, drawn by her own curiosity, it was to find—to her genuine surprise and absolutely abysmal luck—that he was taking it like a champ.

At least, he was appearing to.

The man had the poker face of a Grandmaster, features betraying nothing of what she anticipated might be there. There was no overbearing commiseration, no subconscious need to fill the air with the offer of empty condolences. Tony Stark simply stood where he had when she started, fingers laced together on the tip of the cue stick, waiting as she spoke her fill. There was a perceptible softness to his gaze, not entirely unlike to one he’d shown her back in her apartment, and the steel in his shoulders had all but disappeared, but otherwise his thoughts remained impenetrable.

No aversion, no signs of overload.

Above all, there was no pity.

If this had been a test, he was passing with flying colors.

How…annoying.

Arty cleared her throat pointedly, eager not to linger on that point. “Anywho…that’s all, I guess. About why I ran. It was all very”—she waved a hand with dramatic flourish—“Pavlovian of me. Classic conditioning. Not intended to be personal or induce harmful side effects, it says so on the box,” she joked, fighting the urge to flash a peace sign and put on the sunglasses she hadn’t brought.

He simply rubbed a thumb against the back of his interlocked hands, eyes locking her in place even though he was seemingly lost in thought.

Just what those thoughts were, Arty was becoming increasingly desperate to find out. The lack of standard response, was throwing her for a loop and she had no clue where to go from here.

Any sign would be welcome.

They had to get this show on the road, she had to know they were cool and his feelings were no longer hurt, and she had to do her best to bury the past two weeks and pretend like they never existed. Not that it was possible.

*

‘Figures.’

That’s what his dad had said.

Figures.

That was the only word Howard gave him when Tony’d finally gotten up the courage to show the man the now clear-enough-to-read Soulmark on his arm.

The dark, fuzzy streaks had come into sharp relief only days before, and even at six Tony recognized
his words for ones not to feel enthused about. His youth and inexperience with the complexity of verbal play had competed with his innate genius during those early years, oft leaving him torn about what something meant, versus what something *should* mean, versus what underlying currents were beneath those things, too. His need to make things make sense sometimes jumped ahead of his primal ability to read a situation, as Jarvis had once told him.

Plainly speaking, he’d been acute enough of mind to know his words were not *good*, but young enough to be hopeful an adult would set his nerves straight.

His mistake came from putting any hope in the idea that adult might be his father. Granted, the man hadn’t been his first choice—his mother had been away for a charity event all week and wasn’t due back for a few more days. He also might’ve been better off not choosing a time when the man, who was tactless on a good day, had thrice reached the bottom of his glass and was slurring his words something fierce.

But it’d been the first time Tony had managed to catch his dad alone…and by alone, he meant without mountains of work and various other things more important things than his son.

So Tony had sidled up next to the mans favorite armchair quietly, trying his best to be unobtrusive, waited until his father noticed him through the haze of liquor, and shyly pulled up his sleeve to display the blunt words in neat, elegant script.

Howard Stark had taken one heavy-lidded look at the Soulmark, then one look at Tony’s trembling lip and pleading eyes, and said, “Figures.”

Whether he was referring to the words themselves or his son’s sensitive reaction to them, Tony never found out. Whether the inventor even realized he’d said it out loud, Tony also never knew.

‘A bad day,’ his mother had said upon hearing her husband’s response once she returned.

And Tony’d thought: Yeah. A bad day, on top of a bad week, after a bad month. There was always something.

Later on, he’d heard his parents arguing. His mother had done the brunt of the yelling (exceedingly rare for her to raise her voice to begin with), chastising Howard and the way he spoke to their son, angry at the callous way he’d dismissed his feelings. Tony never heard the rest of that fight, dragged away as he was for private tutoring, but he’d never been on the receiving end of an apology.

‘Figures.’

At the time it’d been said, Tony covered the words back up and left, leaving the study and his father to their quiet solitude.

Without his mom around, he’d run straight to Ana. The Missus of the Jarvis’s was always one of Tony’s favorite people on the planet: his partner in crime for the many pranks pulled on Jarvis himself, a voice of reason so matter-of-fact it sometimes made boy-Tony wonder why she wasn’t considered the pinnacle of wisdom, and a major source of comfort to him all around.

In some ways, he’d even preferred her breed of consolation. Preferred it to the way his mother did her best, fussing over him and consoling him if the need arose, but always ready to tack some excuse for his dad at the end of it. Preferred it to how Jarvis would lay everything out to help him find the source of his anxiety, yet always avoiding speaking ill of his employer if he could help it.

‘An idiot,’ Ana had said of his father in the bluntest of terms. She owed Howard Stark a great debt, but no debt in the world was great enough to cover his ass if him being an idiot was the truth.
‘The fool doesn’t know what he says,’ she had stated with all the confidence in the world as she held him, stroking his hair and letting him cry into her shoulder long after he’d learned to stop shedding tears in front of his father, but long before he’d learned to stop shedding them altogether.

Stark men didn’t cry, after all.

She’d snuggled him closer, singing him sweet lullabies in her native Hungarian and calling him ‘her little man’ in the same tongue. She’d squeezed him tighter, promising him that a boy as sweet and loving as Tony couldn’t possibly have a mate who was anything less and that the words simply had yet to reveal their meaning.

Words had a million feasible meanings, she’d told him, a million feasible opportunities for context; Tony was simply in the unfortunate position of waiting till he met the speaker to know what that was.

Ana’s own words had made no sense to her, either. Something about neck ties and orders for the troops, Tony didn’t remember the specifics. Talk about confusing. They’d only become clear when Edwin Jarvis spoke to her under the mistaken thought she was his commanding officer during WWII in a crowded hotel lobby.

‘It won’t be what you think, kincsem,’ she soothed, drying the tears from his cheeks. ‘Have a little faith. And don’t listen to your father—sometimes he is the lesser end of a horse.’

The words had brought him precious reassurance back then. But over time, as years turned to decades and his fathers disregard became Tony’s own self-contempt, questioning his worth as a Mate just as Howard drunkenly questioned his worth as a successor, Ana’s reassurances ceased to bring him solace and he was left only with the cold hard reality that maybe the words meant exactly what they appeared to mean.

Tony was just as unwanted by his Soulmate as he was by his father.

After Ana died, cancer taking her away along with what small part of him still hoped she was right, Tony’d simply accepted his father’s interpretation as resolute fact.

*Figures.*

His Mate might not want him, but there was an army of money and status hungry individuals who did. At any given time, from his teen years in highschool and college to beyond, after his parents had died and he’d taken up the mantle of CEO, there was a slew of people who just couldn’t wait to get a piece of him—whether that piece was as the son of the great Howard Stark or as the playboy billionaire of his own right didn’t seem to matter.

*They’d* wanted him, he had the charm and the looks to make anyone else want him, and he was only so desperate to bury himself in indulgence of that belief.

And on those nights when it was just a little too hard to keep pretending, when he’d be two bottles deep in his efforts to stave off the revelation that substitutes were just that, he’d roll up his sleeve and ponder just what the hell he’d done for the words on his arm to prove his father right.

The he’d promptly punish himself with another bottle.

‘I hate them,’ Rhodey’d confessed one such night, venom dripping from every syllable as he bodily hauled Tony to the nearest couch from his place on the floor. Rhodey never said it, but Tony knew he’d been dangerously close to breaking their rule and calling an ambulance that time. After he’d checked his pulse and arranged Tony just so, making sure he wouldn’t choke on his own tongue, the
then-Major had sat next to him and gone off on a vicious tirade—most unlike his general countenance—about how much he hated his best friend’s Mate and just what he’d say if he was ever unfortunate enough to cross their path. They were things he’d never said was Tony was sober, and he’d only spoken them then because Tony was probably giving off all the life signs of a toaster.

Standing before her now, in the face of all her unceremonious candor, Tony wondered what Rhodey would think.

He wondered what Ana would’ve thought.

Or even his father.

More than anything, Tony felt the overwhelming sensation of sweet, sweet relief. It poured over him like the purest spring water over burning flesh, offering the first respite to decades of misery. For this part of his life at least, he could stop punishing himself.

It hadn’t been him. It really hadn’t.

It wasn’t anything he’d done, it wasn’t anything he was or was not, it wasn’t anything about himself he could’ve changed.

And to that point, it felt almost fitting that her own part to play in this had been the result of parental scarring—a plethora of Mommy Issues to raise in toast to his Daddy Issues.

Well, cheers to that. It was something he could work with.

‘And cheers to you too, Ana,’ he thought. ‘You were right.’

If she’d been alive for him to say it in person, she would’ve rolled her eyes and said: ‘Of course I was. You should’ve never doubted.’

Now.

If only he could think of what to say; she was looking at him like she was wary of whatever that might be.

Think think think think think.

Before he could, his Mate said something herself:

“So you see, I can’t have anything to do with you.”

…Woah, woah, woah.

Wait.

Hold everything.

‘Back it up now, Ocean Eyes. Say what?’

“Pardon?” His voice better not have sounded as shaky as he thought it did.

She shrugged, trying to play it off like he couldn’t see the slight tremor in her hands. He could. “I’m just saying, it would be better off if we never saw each other again. You can see why I can’t get involved.”
The response at the forefront of his mind, coated liberally in personal dread, was, ‘I see no such thing.’

What actually came out was: ‘Is that so?’

If he spoke more than a few words at a time it might betray more than he wanted. Like the fact his stomach had just done a thousand summersaults and may or may not have forgotten which side was up. He had to play it cool, had to play it calm.

“That’s so,” she confirmed with a sharp nod, avoiding eye contact; however, the wavering in her words undercut their resilience.

“…And why is that?” He could guess why. He wasn’t stupid.

But Tony could see the question made her squirm, and the small breath she took before looking back up.

“Quite frankly, I swore to myself I would never get involved with my Soulmate under the best of circumstances—let alone circumstances which decry a high probability of premature death,” she said.

“…Ah.” Yep.

“Yep,” she said herself, popping her ‘p’ a little, clearly trying to wipe her hands of all the seriousness. “I’m not interested in making the same mistakes as my mother and sister”—Tony tried not to flinch at the word ‘mistake’, tried not to let the ache rise too far in his throat—“and I’m not interested in setting myself up for the not-actually-lives they’re currently…enduring.”

Tony didn’t say anything.

He realized now that she’d come here with the intention for this meeting to be their last, and he was too busy fighting a hurricane of panic because of it.

She continued after another deep breath. “My mother’s Mate’s death was entirely an accident—a freak occurrence. The end of the line can come even when you least expect it,” she let out the air with a huff. “Sean’s death, by contrast, wasn’t entirely unforeseeable. A profession as dangerous as his, the possibility came with the territory. The odds were always there.

“And then there’s, well, you,” she said, couldn’t mask the gentler way she said it. “You make a living saving the world on a day-to-day basis, fighting bad guys and putting yourself in harms way for the good of the human race, flying nukes through alien portals at the cost of your own life. You’re practically a walking statistic for an early grave.”

The arc reactor throbbed a painful reminder in his chest, air becoming a little too thin as he tried to banish the memory of that cold, empty nothingness beyond the wormhole.

She had him there. If there was ever something he couldn’t deny, it was that.

But still...

Tony knew the truth now. He knew the reason behind the words on his forearm.

And the last thing in the universe he wanted was to let her walk away right now without knowing what might be on the horizon for them. A cloud over his life had cleared. Call him selfish, but he wasn’t eager to smother the replacing light ten minutes later. Not today, no sir.
And this was the time, right? That’s what Jarvis had told him when he was younger, that Soulmates only met when they were supposed to—not before, and not after.

He’d wanted it when he was younger. Wanted it bad. He’d seen what the Bond could look like and he’d wanted his own to come as soon as possible, so that he’d have something to take the edge off the loneliness; between the calculating veneer of his father and the boarding schools and the fact he’d routinely graduated a decade earlier than his peers, he wouldn’t have been opposed to a little stationary company.

He hadn’t gotten her, but to his everlasting gratitude he had gotten Rhodey.

But she was here now, and Tony needed to know.

He wanted to know what there was behind the long glances of the Jarvis’, where a simple look conveyed a million and one things as they danced in the kitchen to a tune only they could hear.

He wanted to know what it was about the Bond, about what there was behind the connection that had caused his mother to remain by his father’s side all those years, through the drinking and the fighting and the long hours of work that left barely enough of him for her.

He wanted to know what it was about the depth of the connection that it’d caused Yinsen to look into the face of death and say ‘I want this’ with all the conviction of a saint, unable to endure living a life without those he held most dear.

‘A man who has everything, and nothing.’ That’s what Yinsen had called him.

Tony didn’t want that to be “nothing” anymore.

His Mate wasn’t just scared of being hurt, he got that; everyone was scared of being hurt. What she was terrified of was being relegated to living a life as a hollow shell of who she used to be.

“Makes sense,” he finally said. “Completely rational.”

She seemed surprised, blinking almost as if she hadn’t heard him correctly. “…Really?”

“Really,” he confirmed. “Totally valid line of thought.” And it was. “Can’t lose something if you don’t have it to begin with.”

He couldn’t blame her for wanting to protect herself.

But Tony also couldn’t stop himself from making up his mind on what he was going to propose next.

Because now he’d gotten a taste of stormy sea eyes and a hand that fit perfectly in his and radiant smiles that made the sun seem no grander than a tea-light.

He wasn’t about to let those slip away. Not without a fight.

“Right,” she said slowly, her surprise now laced with suspicion as she eyed him carefully. “So you understand why we shouldn’t see each other again. Ever,” she stressed. “You can see why that would be a bad idea for m—for us.”

“True,” he allowed, feeling truly guilty for what he was about to say. But what did he have to lose? If he didn’t say it, she was going to walk right out anyways.

Besides, Tony wasn’t mad. Er, okay, maybe he was, but not about this. He’d seen the flush in her cheeks back when he’d first extended his hand to her in Pritchard’s office, and the waver in her voice
just now, had reveled in the banter between them. He’d seen the twinkle dancing in her eyes when he’d eaten her cookies and again when she snatched up those fries. He knew she knew it, too. While his ego may have been big enough to make all that up, he knew he hadn’t. He wasn’t that delusional.

It gave him the push he needed to say what he was going to, hoping beyond hope she wouldn’t hate him for it:

“Or you could always-uh, throw caution to the wind and go on a date with me.”

*

It took her a solid minute to process the words past her shock. Once she did, her mouth fell open.


He shrugged, but remained steadfast. “I can think of a couple of Senators who’d be more than happy to tell you yes.”

A joke then. Clearly.

Arty was tempted to ask where the cameras were, but given the technological presence of an honest-to-god AI, the answer might skew towards “everywhere”.

“You’re kidding, right? Messing with me?” He totally had to be.

“Not in the slightest,” he said. “The way I see it, everybody needs a test drive. And if we were to say, part ways now, you might never know what a bullet you dodged.”

“Come again?”

“Well, I could be a massive letdown. A nightmare masquerading in pretty silk suits. I could be a whiny workaholic with no redeemable qualities whatsoever,” he said lightly. “I could also be volatile, self-obsessed,” he added, looking again as though the words were part of some inside joke. “Maybe I eat funny. Or worse,” he said, pointing at her seriously, “maybe our star signs are completely incompatible. You’ll never know unless you give it a try.”

What.

“For all you know,” he continued, “I’d be sparing you a lifetime of wondering.”

What was this? What was he doing? “And sparing me involves taking me out on a date?”

“Of course—I wouldn’t want you to just take my word for it. We barely know each other, and you really shouldn’t trust the word of strangers. I could be leading you astray.”

“Ah, I see,” she said, really not seeing and really wishing her brain would stop spinning. “You’re doing me a favor.”

“Precisely,” he stressed, pointing at her again as though she’d won the lottery. “In fact, best not to think of it as a date at all. Just think of it as your one-stop-shop, all-expenses-paid Conclusion of Disappointment.”

Arty blinked dumbly, shaking her head.

This was not playing out like it had in her mind; he was going way off script.
She was *trying* to set him free—why wouldn’t he let her?

Arty shook her head again, brows furrowed in confusion as she looked at him. “I don’t get it,” she said honestly. “Why would you want this?”

Before he could even open his mouth to say whatever it was she didn’t want to actually hear, she continued. “I mean, I get it—this would all be for my benefit,” she joked, playing along with the BS route they were toeing. “But what are you getting out of it?”

His lips twitched, about to say something, but she cut him off. Again. “Look, I’m nothing special. *Definitely* nothing special,” Arty emphasized, hands up and palms facing him. “You’re just gonna’ have to trust me when I say you don’t want me.” She felt the next words building in her, stronger and more resilient now that she was gaining a second wind taking the piss out of herself. “Really, you don’t. And honestly, I can think of a hundred and one other people right off the top of my head who’d be much more de—suitable.” She’d almost said deserving, and while that certainly felt true that might show a little more weakness than she intended. “You have a whole world of better options out there, Mr. Stark, and—”

“Tony,” he clarified, and continued himself before she had a chance to. “And those ‘Hundred and One’ other people you can think of don’t have *their* words on my skin.” The flippant tone he’d taken only moments before had diminished quite a bit, only to be replaced by that same soft, low resonance he seemed to be understanding had an Effect on her. “You do.”

As a double-jab to her already-weakening state, his eyes were back to doing that…that *thing* they’d done before, stripping away layers of her defenses and unearthing parts of her she really rather wouldn’t have unearthed. Arty was being reeled in on the end of a fishing line, pulled into his wake like—

Ah. She realized now, what all of *this* was.

All of it.

Coma.

That was the only thing it could be. The only explanation for everything that’d happened the past two weeks. She had to have stubbed her toe again, that day in the apartment. She must’ve reached her breaking point and really had thrown herself in front of a car.

This? It was all some grand delusion brought about by her hospitalized state.

And it was a hypothesis easily tested.

Surreptitiously, Arty pinched the sensitive skin of her wrist…and felt the corresponding pain lance through her.

She frowned and pinched another patch of skin. More pain.

…Damn it.

She looked up, back to him and his evil brown quicksand-eyes.

In turn, he leaned forward ever so slightly, resting some of his weight on the cue stick. “…You’re not the slightest bit curious?”

Arty knew what he was talking about. She wished she didn’t, would be better off if she didn’t, but
she did. And to be honest, she didn’t feel like lying about it. Wasn’t sure she could lie about it.

She took a deep breath. “I…I didn’t say I wasn’t curious.”

He studied her face, studied the reaction beneath it. He gave a small, almost imperceptible nod like he’d expected to find what he did. “But that’s not enough,” he said quietly.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” she pointed out numbly, hiding behind the old adage.

“You know,” he said, almost conspiratorially, “there is a second part to that saying.”

And now he was leaning forward a little again, skin around the corner of his eyes crinkling like he was offering her the chance to scheme and plot away with him against some unseen force.

Arty couldn’t think of a single clever retort. Pinned down by the moment as she was, she was prone to giving herself a pass.

And those eyes.

Back in the day, before Tony Stark’s kidnapping and triumphant return to change the whole base of his company, there’d been jokes in certain circles he’d sold his soul to the devil. They’d been jokes about his father too, about any person or company that turned a profit off of war, hardly specific to him alone. Arty’d never put much stock in them till now, when his gaze had her glued to the floor, her mind grasping desperately at straws and coming up short, a lifetimes worth of self-preservation seeming somehow smaller now than it had an hour ago.

Clearly this was Satan’s work.

Arty felt herself shut down.

Like she was in the front row to the worlds most pathetic stage play, she watched with numb intrigue as her base survival instincts wrested control from every other facet of her makeup, knocking them out and tying them up like naughty children.

As if she were only a phantom listening in from the outside, Arty heard herself say:

“I have to go now. I’ve got work.”

Which wasn’t a total lie. She did have work tonight, just not for another four hours or so.

Arty ignored his face and walked around the table, letting her legs carry her on autopilot and giving him a wide berth as she placed her cue stick back on the rack.

This was fine. The fact she couldn’t feel her body was fine. She just needed some fresh air that didn’t smell good like he did, even with the motor oil, and the crowded city air should do just the trick.

When you had to go, you had to go. Not her fault.

When she was halfway back around the table, she paused for half a second, eyeing the still half-full container of fries. Without a second thought, she scooped it up. “Oh, and these are coming with me,” she stated, finally looking him in the eyes. “They’re mine now.”

She closed the box flaps and kept going, no need to linger on what was going on with his face. She couldn’t name whatever it was, but it was there in large quantities.

The elevator opened up for without a sound, which was nice. She didn’t want to have to ask. Her
robot legs brought her inside.

Arty was just turning around to let her back settle against the dark red tiles like before when the man found his voice, and he called out to her.

“Just one date,” he said again, back to the playful tone. “I triple dog dare you.”

Luckily for Arty, the doors closed and she was off, leaving the offer unanswered before the weak parts of her regained control and she did something stupid.

Like agree.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Arty comes to a little (but unfortunately huge) realization about this whole deal.

Notes: Again, I wish there was some way I could articulate how sorry I am for the wait. I wish I had a better way to keep people updated on the updates itself. I do still technically have a tumblr which I never use anymore, and I was kicking around the idea of refreshing it for the purpose of updates, but I'm on the fence about that because it's such a time-stealer. Eh. Anyways, let me know if you have any thoughts, or if that's something anyone would be interested in :) Thanks for your patience guys!
“Arty, wait up!” Brit called out, watching as her friend disappeared around another bend in the trail.

It had to be the tenth time she’d done so in the past hour, increasingly desperate to keep the blonde in her sights in the thick forest, and getting the words out just left her more out of breath.

Panting hard and throat burning, Brit had to take a break. Even for just a minute. She could run on flat ground for hours on end, no problem—and the dancing certainly helped cement her stamina—but running on an incline? Not her thing.

Hands on her knees, Brit stopped and filled her lungs with what felt like gallon after gallon of fresh air. Her calves felt like they were on fire and she could feel the beads of sweat making their way down her neck as she straightened back up. Twisting open her water bottle, she took small, even sips, admiring her surroundings as she did.

The forest they were in was beautiful: huge, full trees with moss covered trunks, the occasional bubbling stream, and the midday sun that was breaking through the heavy foliage was casting everything in hues of gold and green and brown. The air was great, too. Clean, uplifting, nurturing of the body and the soul and all that other good stuff—it was part of the reason she’d suggested they take this mini trip out of the city in the first place, so they could relax and so Arty could revitalize herself with her well-missed hiking hobby and breathe. The blonde seemed to have no trouble with the breathing part, because she’d been leaving Brit in the dust to play catch up ever since they damn well started on this trail.

Not that she was doing it on purpose, or at least Brit didn’t think so. As soon as they’d hit the dirt, fresh off a four-hour drive in JT’s car—bless him for the loaner—familiarity had kicked in for the blonde…and a whole lot of frustration. It was that frustration which led her to start jogging, then all-out running, trying to work off the energy that’d been simmering just beneath the surface since she came back from her little tête-à-tête with Tony Stark. That’d only been two days ago, and Arty hadn’t said a word of what happened, but it was making her feel A Whole Lot Of Things she had suppressed until this point.

The redhead was glad she was working some of it out, but she wished Arty would stop going so fast she vanished for minutes at a time, oblivious to her friend’s calls.

Brit wondered, for about the twentieth time, if maybe she shouldn’t just go back to the small dirt parking lot and wait for her to return. Let her have as much time as she needed while Brit took a nap in the car. But then she remembered she’d watched Arty stand at the stove and hard-boil the same five eggs for three hours straight yesterday, and she couldn’t risk leaving someone in that kind of state by themselves. Her idiot might fall into a ravine or something.

Chest no longer heaving and no longer feeling like she was about to die, Brit took off again at a sprint, hoping Arty hadn’t gotten too far ahead and wondering just when she’d become the
responsible one. It wasn’t a role the redhead was used to and she was finding it kind of strange.

Careful not to trip over her own feet on the well-packed earth, she passed turn after turn, hoping for some stretch of trail that would be direct enough she could pick out the bouncing yellow ponytail.

And when she passed the next bend, going faster now that the ground had leveled somewhat, only her training and quick feet stopped her from damn near slamming into her friend.

‘Must’ve finally needed a break,’ Brit thought gratefully as she backtracked a few steps to join the blonde.

But while Arty was doubled-over in the middle of the path, hands on her knees like the redhead had been minutes before, she wasn’t taking a breather. Her head was down and her entire body was shaking, her shoulders wracked with violent spasms. Small, gasping puffs reached Brit’s ears, like the girl was trying to both inhale and exhale at the same time and her lungs just weren’t having it.

Oh god.

Oh god, oh god, whatever it was had finally come to a head and she was having another attack.

“Arty,” Brit cooed gently, reaching to rest a careful hand on the girl’s back. “Arty, you oka—”

The second her hand made contact, Arty snapped up, threw her head back far, and the redhead was shocked as hell at the laughter that escaped her friend’s lips. So shocked, in fact, she took a step back. The blonde was laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes, laughing so hard she was gasping for breath and repeatedly doubling back over to get her bearings, and she started laughing even harder when she saw Brit’s face, waving a hand wildly in the air at her as though she would love to explain what was so funny but all she could summon was the wasted gesture.

She laughed for minutes, Brit couldn’t say how many, and when she seemed to finally have herself under control, she got another look at the redhead’s confusion and broke out in another fit of giggles, clutching at Brit’s shoulders like a lifeline.

Brit didn’t know what to do about it, so she laughed too.

It was infectious anyways: loud and maddened and uncontained.

“Why are we laughing?” Brit laughed nervously over Arty’s laughter, holding her friend at the elbows for stability.

“Because ,” Arty choked out, barely fighting the words past another barrage, “this is so stupid . Don’t you see? All of this—so stupid .”

Almost falling over from lightheadedness, Arty giggled some more, forcing as much air into her lungs as possible through her fit as she moved her hands to hold both sides of Brit’s face.

“It’s all so ridiculous, Brit! Can’t you see? It’s all so stupidly, stupidly absurd. Soooooo stupid. None of it makes sense”—another giggle—“like how did this happen? How is this a thing? Because it can’t be a thing, you know? But it is? Hilarious!”

The giggling continued as Arty leaned back, still cupping Brit’s face, to look at the trees with a dopey yet half-dead smile. “It’s just…how did I get here? It’s weird, you feel me? Weirdly stupid. I mean, here I am. Me. Here. In this place, yet again.”

Seeing as how they’d never been here before, the redhead could only assume the place they were
talking about was metaphysical.

“I had a plan, you know? A plan,” Arty stressed, eyes wide as she pat Brit on the head like an innocent child before starting down the trail once again.

Brit followed cautiously a few steps behind.

“I had a couple of plans, even,” Arty mused, still chuckling to herself, but the edge was beginning to die off and Brit wasn’t sure she was even being addressed. “And I was doing so good with the plans, too. My first plan? The ‘Hey There and So Long’ gig? Yeah, okay, didn’t pan out so easy. But I made a backup plan, yeah? Clear his conscience and make him see that I’m suuuper far down on the foodchain? Should’ve been a cake walk!”

Arty threw her head back again, shouting into the air: “A! CAKE! WALK!”

Then the girl spun around, pointing at her with eyes wide. “But was it a cake walk? Was it? NO! Noooooo it wasn’t, because Big Mr. Superhero had to come on in with his ridiiiiiculously brown evil quicksand eyes and his aaaabsolutely ridiculous evil smirk and be all: I think you should go on a date with me! HA! A date! Stupid! Hahaha!”

But while Arty convulsed with another round of laughter, Brit stumbled a little in her tracks.

So that’s why Arty hadn’t said what’d happened—it hadn’t gone the way she expected.

In fact, it seemed the opposite had occurred.

Tony Stark had asked her on a date.

“Tony Stark asked you on a date?” She couldn’t help as it slipped out. There were some things your body just said, even if your mind was telling you to be cautious. And this was one of those things you just said, if your best friend happened to be asked out by Tony Stark. “Like, an actual date? Even after you told him everything?”

“Yes!” Arty smiled like a deranged madman as she kept walking, kicking a pebble angrily as she did. “He sure the fuck did! Like he wasn’t even fazed! Who does that? He already has enough of his own shit, who the hell would wanna’ add to—”

Arty stopped dead in her tracks, words dropping out of existence.

Brit stopped as well, hovering behind her a step and waiting for her to continue.

She didn’t. Arty just stood there.

But when she finally did turn, movements akin to a zombie with an unhinged jaw included, it was with pure bewilderment. She was looking at Brit, but looking beyond her, too.

“Tony Stark is my Soulmate,” she breathed.

A few birds chirped nearby.

“Tony Stark is my Soulmate,” Arty said again, even more bewildered as a patch of skin near her eye twitched.

And then the blonde repeated herself a third time, rotating ninety degrees in that same zombie-like fashion like she was unaware how she’d gotten here.
And then she repeated herself a fourth time, and a fifth time, and a sixth time, each time turning until she once again faced the redhead.

Brit reached out…and poked her.

Arty’s eyes came into focus, narrowing in on the other girl. “Tony Stark is my Soulmate?”

So now they were phrasing it like a question.

Oh.

Wait a minute, was this The Moment?

The Moment she had been waiting for?

The Moment where it finally struck Arty like a lightning bolt just who her Mate was?

Yes, her friend had already had a number of breakdowns at the knowledge, but they had all thus far been the result of the traumatized part of her. They had been the result of the part of her needed that needed to dismantle and break down how she would handle getting out of it.

Brit had been waiting for the day when it would be more and finally hit home for Arty, when she would finally see the full depth, the wider implications, the totally and completely buck-wild reality that her best friend in the whole wide worlds Mate was Tony Fucking Stark.

The Tony Stark.

For the sake of said best friend’s mental health, she hadn’t brought it up and was waiting patiently for the day she’d come to the conclusion past her coping process. But she’d made her own plan just in case: Brit would sit her down all gentle-like on the couch, give her Marcos’ favorite stuffed alligator, Mr. Snappers—who was the perfect size for the squeezing the life out of—to hold, play some soothing music with harps and flutes and all those tranquilizing instruments, and make her some tea to keep her calm so she wouldn’t twitch herself into oblivion.

She expected the day would come when she’d need the plan.

Arty’s trauma was a part of her, but it wasn’t all of her.

Conditioned Arty wouldn’t be enough to hold back Normal Human Response Arty from having her own reaction to the matter, not indefinitely.

But it’d been so long already though that Brit had started wondering if Arty would ever really let that realization sink past her wall of nope.

Apparently, she’d underestimated her friends resilience to still process things like the twenty-three year old she was, because this seemed to be It.

“Tony Stark…mine??”

It was.

“Noooo!” Brit cried out, throwing her hands into the air. “You can’t do this now—I had a plan!”

“Tony Stark, the Tony Stark…”

“You,” Brit said, jabbing a finger lightly to the shocked girls forehead, “are not supposed to do this
now! Not in the middle of a forest! I don’t have any of the things I need!"

“It can’t be…”

“I had a whole thing set up,” Brit whined to herself. “I was gonna’ sit you down with a cuddly, squeezable lovey and play you some soothing music—I even had Enya ready to go in the CD player! How could you do—”

“Tony Stark…no way…” She was muttering, staring off into the distance.

“—and I was gonna make you some chamomile—”

“Impossible,” Arty muttered, but then her eyes snapped into focus like a switch had been flipped. “Wait, what? What do you mean you…hey, is that why you moved Mr. Snappers to the coffee table?”

“Maybe.”

Arty shook her head, fighting to keep the haze out of her eyes. “I can’t believe this…there’s just no way, it’s not—”

“Possible? But it is.”

“But me? Me??”

“Yes, you.”

“Nuh-uh, no way in shit, there literally has to be some mistake,” Arty said, shaking her head firmly to keep the haze cleared. “Quick, pinch me.”

“I’m not gonna’ pinch you, cuz you’re not dreaming,” Brit huffed. “You’re just going to have to accept it.”

Arty glared at her. “Pinch me,” she demanded, holding her arm out. “I already tried this once and it didn’t work, but maybe that’s because I did it to myself, so just—”

Brit pinched her before she could finish her sentence.

“Oww! Did you need to do it that hard?” She rubbed at the skin. “You didn’t need to make it hurt that much—” She cut herself off, understanding falling over her face. Arty closed her eyes. “Oh, fuck me. This is…real?”

Brit nodded. “’Fraid so. I was there and everything. Front row witness.”

“I don’t believe it,” Arty said, tone numb as she looked at the red welt.

“Believe it…and, if you don’t mind me saying, cuz I’ve had to hold this in for nearly three weeks, but… holy fuck, dude.”

“Holy fuck,” Arty echoed.


“Oh my god.”

“Yeah.”
“No.”

“Yep.”

“How is this even possible?” Arty asked desperately, begging Brit with her eyes to clear up this whole mess. “Who designed this system?”

The redhead had no answer but a shrug.

“I mean,” Arty continued, “this is so messed up. Clearly something went wrong, some cosmic lines got crossed by accident or something, because me? That’s just… not right.”

Now it was Brit’s turn to shoulder the confusion, but she had a feeling she knew where this was going. “What do you mean not right?”

“I mean this isn’t right,” Arty said firmly. “This isn’t how it should be. Guys like him aren’t the Soulmates of people like me! Guys like him should have Soulmates who are like, I don’t know, fucking royalty or something. Not me. What even is this?”

Brit opened her mouth but Arty rolled right over her. “I am hardly a catch, there’s nothing about me that should be desirable in a Mate for someone like him!”

“Hey now, I don’t think that’s—”

“I’m nothing. I don’t have any kind of status whatsoever, I don’t come from a rich family with money or a good name—hell, I don’t even have two pennies to rub together! I’m not a genius, I don’t have anything near what one might call “stable employment”, I work three part-time jobs, one of which might put Laurent’s career on the line if I ever stopped using my ghost name for the articles, and oh yeah, why do I work those three part-time jobs? Because I didn’t even graduate!”

“Hey,” Brit cut in sternly. “That wasn’t your fault, and you know it. It was Thomas’s.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know that,” the blonde said, waving her off and taking a steady breath. “I do. Scumbag can go to hell, but still. Tony Stark has what, 500 PHD’s? I don’t even have my frickin’ Bachelors!”

“You would have—”

“Oh, oh! And to top it all off? I’m not even pretty! I’m—”

Brit jabbed a finger into the air. “Okay, first of all: slander. I will not suffer this falsehood upon your person. Secondly—”

Arty shook her head furiously. “No, no, no, no—you don’t get to tell me I’m pretty when you’re the one who got hit by puberty and came out of it looking like a Tolkien elf! And okay, yeah, maybe I’m not hard to look at, but have you seen some of the girls he’s hooked up with? Have you? Supermodels—all of them! Gorgeous across the board! What about me is supposed to stand up to something like that?”

Arty stopped, filled her lungs, and launched into another tirade.

It was at this point Brit just sighed and let her go, watching the blonde pace back and forth across the trail as if giving a lecture to the Universe on why it had miscalculated and needed to get a new operating system.
Brit even pulled out the bag of trail mix from Arty’s pack (which was a delicate balance in and of itself as her friend wouldn’t stop moving) to have a little snack while she listened.

Only once Arty had lectured herself into silence, running her hands angrily through her hair and glaring at any leaf on any tree that dared rustle, did Brit wrap an arm around the girl’s shoulders and pull her in close.

“Come on, you,” she said. “Let’s find that path down to the lake the map showed us so you can throw some big-ass rocks in it.”

Arty sniffed, crossed her arms, and nodded.

* * *

“I see you, Sir.”

Tony snatched his hand back, fingers twitching.

Feeling very much the scolded child—which was annoying since JARVIS was more or less his child—he settled back in his stool, readjusting his view of the left shoulder’s weapons-casing unit. The rest of the Mark VII was scattered about the worktable to his right.

His phone, still black with standby mode, sat uselessly to his left: just out of arm’s reach, and just as tempting as it’d been for the last seven hours.

One quick peak could’ve told him if he’d missed something. Tony zoned out so much during his tinkering he might’ve missed a whole battalion marching through the workshop…

But out of the corner of his eye, hovering behind him and equidistant between the man and his cell, was DUM-E.

Waiting.

The fire extinguisher was still in his utility arm, and the hose was still pointed straight at Tony.

He looked back at the shoulder plating, playing it cool. He had some of the physical blueprints of the Mark VII with him at the table—not that he needed them in the slightest—so maybe if he pretended to set them down far to his left, conveniently near his phone, to get them out of the way, then he could pull a little slight of hand without the AI noticing.

Gathering the papers up, he started to slide them over casually—

“You are not as subtle as you think, Sir, and while I am not thrilled at the prospect of using DUM-E, I will if I have to.”

“Oh come on!” Tony whined, throwing his hands uselessly into the air, not caring that the blueprints were sent fluttering to the floor.

DUM-E quivered as much as a machine was capable under his gaze, but held the fire extinguisher fast.

“As I assured you an hour ago, and three hours before that, I will inform you should Miss Thatcher attempt to make contact. Until then, you are not allowed to initiate contact yourself until the allotted five days are up.”

“That sounds arbitrary,” he bit out, knowing it wasn’t. “DUM-E, I swear, if you use that thing on
“Sir, need I remind you that these were your orders in the first place?”

“Yeah,” he grumbled to himself. “What exactly were those again?” They seemed rather insignificant now.

“To—and I quote—“do everything in my power to prevent you from acting like an overly zealous idiot teenager incapable of exercising restraint because desperation is not attractive and the immaturity of being unable to be patient is “Out”.”

“Wow, am I long-winded,” he grumbled again.

“Quite. Giver her time, Sir.”

He wanted to give her time. That was why’d he’d set the five day limit before contacting her again to begin with. Anything less than that was wouldn’t give her the space she needed to let his proposition marinate, and anything more than that would make his interest seem like an afterthought.

But the truth was: Tony was going through hell. He thought five days would be easy enough to handle if he populated his time right; he’d even finally had that meeting with the mayor to give him something to effectively kill the hours away. But every minute he didn’t have closure and was left stewing was a minute of torture. Wondering was hell, waiting was hell.

When had he gotten this desperate? He didn’t like it.

“Maybe she didn’t think I was serious,” he started, tentatively reaching for the phone.

“Sir, I am warning you, for your own good—”

“Just a quick little—”

“DUM-E.”

Shaking, the bot raised the fire extinguisher.

“I swear to god, you two, I made you and if you so much as—”

* * *

The plethora of hiking trails around Lake George had been the main draw for their outing, but the cute little town with the cute little retro diner was definitely a bonus—especially for the famished gals they were.

But Arty was having a hard time seeing it for its joys.

“Inconceivable,” she said firmly.

“No—improbable.”

“Farcical.”

“Unlikely,” Brit corrected.

“Preposterous,” Arty insisted.
“…Fascinating?”

“Ugh,” Arty moaned, burying her head in her folded arms on the table in their little corner of Miss Bee’s Diner. “It’s absurd,” came the muffled words. “I still don’t get it.”

For the life of her, Arty just wasn’t understanding. She pulled her head back up. “I get why the Universe is doing this to me—because it hates me, lets be honest. But I still don’t get why the Universe would do this to him. That’s just mean. It should’ve given him someone better. Someone more qualified.”

“Mmm, speaking of him,” Brit said, taking another sip of her lemonade and avoiding saying his name out loud. The diner was relatively empty, most people still at work on a weekday, but she’d rather be safe than sorry with the specifics. “You never told me what he said.”

Arty tilted her head. “What he said?”

“When you told him no. To the date.”

When her friend didn’t immediately respond and instead chose to look anywhere but at the redhead herself, fingers suddenly looking for something to do as they drummed nervously at the tabletop, Brit understood.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, dropping her voice and leaning in closer. “You didn’t tell him no, did you?”

Arty sniffed. “I didn’t tell him yes, either.” She looked out the window.

“But you didn’t tell him no.”

The blonde looked at her, clear anguish and confusion in her eyes. “I… I tried. Sort of… maybe…”

Brit placed her hands on top of Arty’s own interlocked ones. “Meaning?”

“Meaning,” she exhaled shakily, “that I could’ve put up more of a fight than I did. It was just… hard. I don’t know why. It’s like I couldn’t tell him no. It was… it was almost like he could read my mind and knew exactly how to get under my skin.”

While the waitress passed by on her way to another table, the blonde shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, looking utterly helplessly.

Brit felt a little part of her die inside. Arty wasn’t usually the helpless one.

Once the waitress was out of hearing distance, her friend continued, leaning even closer as she formed her words. “It’s like…it’s like he does this thing with his eyes, right? This kind of—I don’t know—this kind of… magical fuckery. This stupid thing, where it’s like he can see right through everything I say to him or everything I do. I swear he’s using some kind of spell. Purely sorcerous.” Arty snorted, rolling her eyes. “Ridiculous, right?”

But the way she leaned back now, hands still under Brits with her eyes falling to her lap, was enough to tip the redhead off to the truth.

Brit understood, and her whole body went soft. “You wanted to tell him yes, didn’t you?”

Arty looked up and blinked rapidly past the sudden reflectiveness in her eyes but didn’t answer.
The redhead squeezed her hands tighter, trying to impress her comfort. “Arty?”

Her friend looked down again. “M-maybe…”

“Hey,” Brit said, voice quiet yet soothing. “It’s okay, you know. It’s okay if you want to tell him yes.”

Arty thumbed at the back of her hand, voice barely audible as she whispered, “No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is ;” Brit said, using an index finger beneath the chin to gently lift the girls face. “It’s alright.”

“No, it’s not ;” she grit out.

The redhead grimaced. “Those are your mothers words, Arty. Not yours. You’re allowed to feel what you want, and you’re allowed to do what you want. And if you want to tell him yes”—Arty squirmed—“then…maybe you should.”

Hand trembling beneath the taller girls, Arty drew a shaky breath. “I…I just—”

“Okay ladies!” Came the sing-song voice of the graying waitress as she bustled out of the kitchen, tray stacked to bursting. “Orders up!”

Arty perked up, relieved by the interruption. Brit let go of her hand reluctantly, but with one final squeeze to let her know this conversation wasn’t over.

“Alrighty then,” the older woman breezed, smiling genuinely at them while she unloaded the first plate. “I’ve got our famous Banana-Bread Waffles for the Lady in Red,” she intoned happily as she slid the dish towards Brit, “and our famous Hash-brown Skillet with an extra side of hash-browns for the Lady in Yellow.” She slid them both over to Arty.

Beaming at both girls, she asked kindly, “Is there anything else I can get for ya? Would you like a refill on that lemonade, sweetheart?”

“Oh, yes please,” Brit smiled.

“And how ‘bout you, love? Another hot chocolate?”

“I’ll pass, but thank you!”

“You sure about that, dear? It’s on the house, for both of ya’,” she said, pointing between them and winking. “I have a soft spot for people who order breakfast at 3pm—gotta’ enjoy life while you can! Unlike Roger over there”—the waitress pointed slyly over her shoulder—“he only ever does his coffee black and never orders anything that isn’t “appropriate” for the time.”

Arty groaned playfully, “You’re twisting my arm here, so…sure, why the hell not. Hit me up.”

With another wink and a “ that’s what I like to hear ”, she disappeared for those refills.

“You know,” Brit said as she unwrapped her utensils, “I’ll still never, ever be able to understand how you fit so much food in your body. Where do you keep it all?”

“Trauma burns a lot of calories, I guess” Arty said easily, eyeing the redhead to see if she’d let the joke slide. “Also, I share with the monster in my belly.”

“Care to share that monster with me?”
“Pfft. Get your own belly monster,” Arty said as she moved aside both of her own plates to drag Brit’s close. She pulled out her knife and fork, and set to work on Brit’s waffles. “Speaking of things we’ll never be able to understand: I’ll never get why you can’t just cut your own damn waffles.”

The redhead scoffed, throwing a hand over heart. “Excuse you. I am perfectly capable of doing it myself, thank you…I just like the way you do it so much better.” She grinned, propping her chin on her hand as she watched. “You just make the lines so neat. And the portions so exquisitely bite-sized. I always tell people, there’s no waffle like an Arty-cut waffle—yaaaaay, thanks friend,” she squealed in delight as Arty pushed the finished work back to her with a shake of her head.

Brit speared a piece and held it aloft before devouring it. Humming around the sweet banana-breaded goodness, she gave a muffled, “You’re the best.”

Arty rolled her eyes. “I just slice the waffles, I don’t make em’.”

“You’re the best,” Brit said again when their lovely waitress returned with their refills, setting them down with another beaming smile.

When the woman disappeared for good this time with no worry of sudden interruptions, Brit pointed at the blonde with her fork and said, oh-so nonchalantly, “Speaking of being the best, we should talk about why you won’t go on a date with the man when you clearly want to.”

“Aaaand we’re back to this already,” Arty huffed, hand with her fork falling uselessly to the table. “Goody. I thought I’d at least have a chance to get through half of my skillet first. And what do those two things have to do with each other? That’s not a good segue.”

“It’s the perfect segue, because you’re my best friend and I only want the best things for you. And that includes making sure you’re not dismissing something that could be a good thing out of hand because it’s something you’ve been trained to do.”

Arty glared over her hash-browns. “You know it’s more than that. Don’t make it sound so simple.”

“Yes, I do know it’s more than that,” Brit conceded. She knew it wasn’t just her mother’s influence; she knew Arty’d had to watch her sister fall apart, too. “I didn’t mean to make it sound like I was trivializing it. But I also know you well enough that, by not giving him a firm answer one way or the other, that’s really just you being scared of the answer you actually wanted to give. For you, Arty-Pants…that’s huge. You can’t just ignore it.”

The blonde squared her jaw. “Yeah, well. I can’t just let one stupid moment of weakness make a decision that ruins my life, either. I should’ve given him a solid no. But noooo, I was admittedly caught up in his stupidly deep brown eyes and his stupid subpoena for Santa’s sleigh—”

“Santa’s sleigh? What are y—”

“—and his stupid little trick with the fries. God. How dumb is that?” Arty stabbed viciously at a hunk of tomato.

Brit felt another piece of her die. “…You don’t need to feel guilty for feeling things, Arty. And you don’t need to feel guilty for being curious, either. That’s natural.”

“He’s going to die,” Arty said simply, poking uselessly at her food.

Brit frowned. Saying they all were going to die eventually was a waste of air when she knew what the girl was referring to. “You don’t know that,” she whispered.
“Yes I do.”

“No, you don’t. The world is weird as hell. For all we know you could end up dying first. You could get hit by a car a week from now and we’d never know. Maybe the Black Plague comes back with a vengeance and you bite the dust. The world doesn’t play fair.”

Arty was shaking her head furiously, not wanting to consider any of this. “No, no, no. You know the odds as well as I do.”

“The world doesn’t always play the odds, either.”

“The man makes it his job to risk his life!” Arty practically snarled, but there was fear behind those blue eyes. “How many times has he already almost died? Five? And those are just the ones we know about!”

The redhead considered this. “Actually…” she said carefully, “I think you’re missing an obvious point.”

Arty snorted, then set down her utensils and folded her arms. “Oh, really? Enlighten me.”

Brit took a deep breath, choosing her next words carefully. She splayed her fingers out on the cool table in a placating manner. “I think you’re missing the fact that he survived all those things, too. Yeah, he’s come pretty close to death numerous times, but he came out alive every single time. Man has a ridiculously high survival rate, and I’m guessing that can’t all be due to luck. He has skill in the Death-Defying Department.”

Arty’s glare intensified, but she didn’t respond.

Brit took that as opening. “Look,” she said, trying to get across that she wasn’t trying to hurt her. “All I’m saying is…there are no guarantees. Ever. In anything. Not life, not love, not in a happily ever after, no nothing. Bad shit happens all the time”—she stopped herself just shy of saying, ‘I know you understand that better than most’, and continued—“and there’s no way to predict when it comes knockin’. You have to take the good stuff where you can get it.”

The blonde’s eye were pure hellfire at this point, but Brit could see that it was because she didn’t like the sense in what she was saying.

“I’m just saying, Arty, even if you do agree to go on a date with him…it’s not like you’re locking yourself into a contract. You can just see how it goes. Have a little fun. See if you guys click. And if you don’t, you don’t. No harm done.”

Arty’s face twitched. “And if we do?”

“That’s up to you. It’s your life. But can you honestly say you’d rather be like Leah and never be still enough to find out? Sleeping and drinking and partying your way through Europe to avoid having to face that very question? Avoiding your home for years on end because you might happen to run into your Soulmate a second time? That’s not living. It’s just good old fashioned Pretend.”

And honestly? One day it was going to bite her friend’s sister in the ass. People couldn’t evade things forever. Even if Leah’s Mate had been so hungover when they met she had no clue who Leah was.

“You’re going to see him everywhere, Arty. Literally. The man’s on every newspaper and TV network in existence at least once a week. Even if you do decide you want to play make-believe and shun everything to do with him—which will be soooo much wasted energy in and of itself—do you
really want that? You *adore* the guy. You saved up for *five months* to attend the Stark Expo—"

"Which I couldn’t end up affording to attend anyways," Arty grumbled to herself, still bitter. "Besides, I wanted to go for the *science*. So many multi-field experts? It would’ve been extraordinary. There was this guy who said he was working on a non-radioactive environmental mapper that Laurent and I thought might have potential for archeological use."

Brit had to bite her tongue so as not to let out an ‘ *uh-huh, sure*’, even though she knew there was truth in her friend’s words. "You wrote that paper on him for your Political Science class,” she pointed out.

“That was an essay on Monumental Figures of the 21st century. He was an obvious choice.”

“Didn’t you also go to that panel of his on robotics?”

“First off, Sandy dragged me to that thing to get us out of the house. Secondly, he wasn’t even there the day we went. And third: I was *six*."

“You defended him when that one dumbass insinuated he flew that nuke through the portal-thingy as a publicity stunt.”

“A—I’m not allowed to point out idiocy when I see it anymore?” Arty queried. “And B— you defended him too.”

Brit narrowed her eyes and pulled out the big guns. “You said his neck must be sore from bearing the world’s supply of sexy on his shoulders.”

Arty’s mouth fell open. “I’d just fractured my ankle and was high on pain meds!”

Brit raised an eyebrow, no need to say a damn thing.

Arty sniffed. “Okay, fine. I said what I said, and I would’ve said it without the meds. But you can’t blame me for having a pulse.”

“How ‘bout that time you said—”

“For Christ’s sake, can we stop talking about something that’s never gonna’ happen anyways? My hash-browns are getting cold!”

“I’m just pointing out—”

“Well stop. *Please.*”

Brit did. Despite her tone, she could in see in Arty’s eyes that she’d been pushed far enough and was done humoring her.

They went back to their meal in silence, broken only by a shrill ting every time Arty stabbed her plate unnecessarily hard.

*

“**RRRRAAARGGGHHHHH!!**”

Narrowly avoiding certain death, both girls dove for safety to keep well out of the way of the group of stampeding kids being pursued by one of their own. Only when the herd had passed, bustling between the adults without a second thought in their chase, did Arty and Brit feel confident enough
to come together on the path once again.

“Oh my god, I almost lost my ice cream,” Arty said, sighing with relief.

“I did lose mine,” Brit said, staring forlornly at her lemon sorbet in the grass.

Arty leaned around her and looked at it too. “The perils of choosing the cone,” she said seriously. “Those scoops can always come flying off.” She jiggled her own cup of dessert. “Want to share?”

Brit eyed the cup suspiciously. “What flavor did you get again?”

“A chocolate-y, peanut-butter-y type of something.”

The redhead shrugged and Arty handed over her spoon.

It was nearing sunset, the moon was already visible on the horizon, and a warm breeze was dancing through the trees in the park they were in.

They’d called JT not long after Miss Bee’s Diner, both of them deciding they’d rather just shell out the money for a one-night stay at the town’s little Bed-and-Breakfast than endure another four-hour drive, and he’d given them his blessing to bring the car back the next day. After that they’d wandered the main street for a few hours, window-shopping and petting cute dogs, before coming across a little Mom and Pop ice cream joint and unanimously deciding that was the perfect treat to end their day.

Their walk through the park had been thoroughly pleasant—and quiet—until the feral children had blasted onto the scene. At least they were having fun, even if one wondered where their parents were. But, small towns and all.

“Anyways, you were saying?” Arty asked as they started off towards the playground. Nobody was using it and no force in the universe could stop them from enjoying a good swing-set, no matter how old they were. “Another four months?”

Brit nodded, humming around the spoon in her mouth. “Yep—but at least we’ll have a whole three weeks once he gets here!”

Arty shook her head. “Still, that’s…so far away.”

Brit put on a good show about being okay with Marcos’ absence, but she knew the redhead was probably screaming inside. She and her now-husband had only been sweethearts since they were fourteen, and this new manner of being away from him for so long (especially when his work with Stark Enterprises put him in a relatively precarious position) took a toll on her. It was part of the reason Brit had begged Arty to come with her to New York to begin with.

“Time flies. He’ll be back before we know it,” the redhead insisted, more to herself than her companion.

Arty handed over the ice cream cup in silent consolation. Brit took it without a word as they settled onto the swings. It was hard to adjust into a position where the chains didn’t dig into her hips, but it was possible.

“How’s your mom?” Arty asked to change the subject. Even weeks later, she still felt like she was playing catch-up on what she’d missed while she was “out”.

“Good!” Brit beamed, cheering up. “Still in complete remission—and she feels better every day!”
Arty fist-pumped the air. “Good ol’ Betty, kickin’ ass.”

“Mm-hmm,” Brit hummed. “Speaking of kicking ass, how’s the—”

“MWAARGHHAAAARRRR! SMASH!!”

The kids had come back around, tearing through the playground like a tornado and kicking up woodchips. The same pursuer as before—a little dark haired girl with green marker on her face and arms—was right behind them, snarling and waving her fists in the air as the others evaded her with shrieks of laughter. They were clearly playing some kind of game. The other four children were all dressed up in some fashion: one of them had a red towel around his shoulders like a cape, held together with a binder clip; one of them had a dummy bow-and-arrow set in her hands, those kinds with the suction cups on the end; one of them was dressed all in black—even his shoes were black—and he was dual-wielding a wicked pair of finger guns; and the last one…the last one had on a plastic Iron Man mask.

Oh.

“—business?”

Arty blinked, watching the kids tear out again as the marker covered girl screamed a torrent of ‘SMASH!’s behind them.

“Great,” the blonde said after a moment, trying to shake away any thought that tilted towards the man whose mask that kid was wearing.

This was fine.

She was fine.

They were just kids playing a game, they weren’t on a secret errand to remind her of why they’d left the city to begin with.

The Avengers were a huge thing right now. No big deal.

Every kid needed a hero.

Taking a deep breath, Arty leaned back to kick off on her swing, focusing on the question. “Really great,” she affirmed. “Sandy sent me the inventory a few days ago and business is booming. ‘Course it always booms in the summer, cuz that’s when everyone wants to go to outside café’s and plant stuff, but it seems succulents are primed to make a comeback.”


“Except soft. Pet-able cacti,” Arty agreed, having to speak louder now that she had a good pace going. “I’ve got to do the numbers and make a shipment when we get home, and then—”

“SMASH!”

Arty foot almost collided with the kid in black’s head as the group wove their way around them and back through the playground. Brit held onto the ice cream cup for dear life, shielding it against her chest with a mumbled ‘not today’.

Most of the costume-wearing Junior Avengers were scrambling on top of the jungle gym in their fight to avoid the Hulk-girl’s smashing’s, jumping away from the edges so she couldn’t reach their
feet. The other girl was chattering on about wanting it to be her turn to play the bad guy that had to do the chasing, and the boy in the cape was repeatedly thrusting a stick into the air like it would summon lightning to smite their attacker. The girls eventually did switch places, the bow-wielder hopping down to seek out a better vantage point, while the dark-haired Smasher ran around to the other side of the stairs and the boys aimed to disperse.

Looking back on it, that was the point Arty decided they should’ve left the park sooner.

Why?

Because she had no way to prepare herself when the little boy in the Iron Man mask stood at the top of the tall slide and flung his hands to his chest suddenly like he’d been shot, she had no way to prepare herself when he gasped loudly and collapsed dramatically and let his body slide down the incline with splayed arms like a limp noodle, and she had no way no prepare herself when his body slowed to a stop, falling the last two feet towards the woodchips without a sign of life.

Arty flung a foot down, stopping her momentum dead in its tracks.

She didn’t register the pain that lanced up her leg at the force of the impact. She didn’t register the little boy lifting his head to whine out past the mask: “Sarahhh, you were supposed to catch meeee. S’how it happened, Hulk catches Iron Man!”

She only felt cold.

Cold, despite the lingering heat of the day and warm breeze still playing around them.

Cold, like she’d been plunged into the Antarctic in nothing but her underwear.

Cold, like an ice pick had been shoved into her chest and then left to bleed through her chest cavity.

Just cold.

Some small, far away piece of her registered Brit’s voice, but she hadn’t a clue what she was saying.

She could only watch, numb, as the little Iron Man eventually jumped up to scramble after the others, and after that she could only stare at the spot where he’d lain. A small imprint from his fall was still outlined in the wood pieces.

No.

No, please no, please, please n—

“—rty? You hear me?” Arty vaguely registered something pulling at her arm.

When she didn’t respond, she was vaguely aware of being moved, as though something were tugging her swing to the side. And then she was vaguely aware of gentle fingers on her face, prodding her back to life.

“Hey, what is it? What’s wrong?” Brit’s face was slowly coming into focus, filling her vision with the redhead’s wide-eyed worry.

Arty’s throat was dry. It was so very, very dry.

She wondered what it sounded like to Brit when she managed to croak out:

“T’m going to have to watch him die.”
She swallowed thickly, painfully.

“I’m going to have to watch him die anyways. No matter what I do. No matter where I go. I’m going to have to watch him die, aren’t I?”

And it was true.

Brit was right. In the world they lived in, there was never going to be a way she could avoid him.

In the world they lived in, there was never going to be a way she could avoid his death.

Almost every part of his life had been recorded. His many near-deaths had already been cemented into every corner of the Internet. There probably wasn’t a single person alive who hadn’t seen his fall from the wormhole—hell, even these kids had seen it.

Hide from it or not, try to avoid attachment or not…in the end, she’d still have to watch.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

This had to be Hell.

At the very least it had to be Purgatory.

Specifically designed for her. Her own special torment.

And she didn’t believe in either Hell or Purgatory.

*

“I’m not going to tell you that, Arty. You know I’m not.” The woman’s voice was still laced with the sleep Arty’s call had dragged her from, but she wasn’t upset.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not my place. It’s not my job. It’s not my life.”

“Please,” Arty choked, aware she was practically begging and none too proud of herself for it. She tried to keep the volume to a minimum, not wanting to wake any other residents of their little hostel from her rocking chair on the porch. “Please, for the love of all things, you’ve gotta’ help me out, Johnni. You know better than anyone else what this might do to me. You know what this might turn me into. Please, just tell me what to do—”

“Artemis,” the woman said, in that soft-yet-firm, let-me-take-you-under-my-wing-way. “I’ve known you since you were eleven. I’ve known your family just as long. And I’m not just your therapist; I’m your friend. But I’m not going to tell you what to do about this.”

“Please—”

“You don’t need me for this, kid,” she said gently. “You told me you met him, what? Three weeks ago?”

Yes, but Arty hadn’t said who he was. Nor had she implied his high mortality rate. Nor had she given any details other than ‘I found him’ before launching into her dilemma.

“You didn’t need me three weeks ago, you took care of it yourself. And you don’t need me for this either. You have all the tools you need to figure out what you want at your disposal, and you’ve been
preparing yourself for years. I trust you. You have good judgment, and you know what you’re doing. I trust your decision to make the right choice for you, whatever that may be. You need to give yourself the benefit of doubt and do the same. Artemis Maxwell Thatcher is a trustworthy person, you know.”

‘Artemis Maxwell Thatcher is a weakling who was taken in by exactly one cheeky grin and a pair of soulful eyes,’ Arty thought disparagingly.

“But if it helps at all,” Johnni said, “I will say this: will you regret it? When you look back ten years down the line, will you regret your decision one way or the other? Just something to think about.”

Arty closed her eyes, rubbing at her temple with her free hand.

A creak from the porch floorboards next to her tipped her off to someone approaching from behind.


“Anytime, small stuff,” she could hear the smile on the end of the line. “Anytime.”

Arty watched Brit lean against the railing before her.

She was about to hang up when the muffled voice made her draw the phone back to her ear. “Oh, and Arty? I just wanted to say I’m proud of you. I can only guess how hard these last few weeks must’ve been for you, but it was very brave what you did—seeking him out. No matter your decision, I just want you to know I’m proud.”

After they’d disconnected, and Arty had enough time to settle, Brit spoke up from behind her:

“…So how’d it go?”

“Terrible,” Arty supplied. “She refuses to make my life simpler by just telling me what to do. So unhelpful.” Arty glared half-heartedly out of the corner of her eye. “Kind of like you, but in the opposite way.”

“Hey,” she said, hands up in surrender. “I didn’t tell you what to do.”

“You might as well have. You want me to say yes to the date.”

“Then maybe you’re assigning something a little deeper that isn’t mine into the picture,” she defended. “I’m not saying I want you to go on a date with him. I’m saying, whether you choose to do so or not...make sure it’s your choice. Because I’ll support you no matter what—I just want to be sure it’s you I’m supporting.” ‘And not your mother’ were the unspoken words. “Okay?”

With that, the redhead stood, patting her on the shoulder as she did, then left.

Arty sat a while longer, listening to the sounds of night and wishing she could just melt into the darkness where she didn’t have these problems, before following. At least the sweet embrace of a near-coma would get her close.

Of course it didn’t come.

It was a good thing the room they got in the Bed-and-Breakfast was a two-bed, otherwise she’d have kept Brit up all night with her tossing and turning.

Not a damn thing could put her to sleep.
She tried meditating, she tried every breathing exercise in the book, she even put in her headphones and listened to the sound of rain and thunder for two hours; in the end, she was as wide awake as if she’d been injected with two liters of caffeine.

It might’ve had to do with the fact that every time she closed her eyes, she saw those brown eyes bearing down on her, stealing away her every ounce of resistance. It might’ve had to do with the fact that every time she rolled over, she saw him stepping into her path and telling her he’d prefer it if she stayed. It might’ve had to do with the fact that every time she drew a breath, she couldn’t ignore the weight on her chest when he’d asked her if she wasn’t even the slightest bit curious.

‘Throw caution to the wind and go on a date with me.’

Arty’d never thrown caution to the wind in her entire life. Not that she could recall. She’d done plenty of risky things, and she’d done plenty of things out of spite, but she’d never so totally disregarded the measures of safety so as to leave her with no sense of direction or understanding of the consequences.

She played it safe, responsible.

What he was asking her to do was akin to asking her to balance on a tightrope five thousand feet above a lava sea, weighed down by two-hundred pound dumbbells, wearing a blindfold. And there was probably a monkey somewhere behind her, jumping up and down and shaking the rope beneath her feet so she couldn’t even rely on that.

He might not really know it, but that’s what he was asking.

It was practically madness.

And it was a madness Arty found herself crazily considering.

If her mother had even an inkling that the thought was crossing her youngest’s mind, she’d probably try to kill her again.

But oh well.

Arty didn’t want to keep living her life as a series of what-ifs. She didn’t want to keep living her life shunning her emotions and peeking around the corner, terrified of where said emotions might lead. She didn’t want to keep living her life playing it safe and avoiding all the things that might potentially make it less so.

Brit was right: avoiding taking a chance on anything wasn’t living at all, and the best things in life were often the ones worth putting yourself on the line for.

Arty had spent her childhood absorbing the impacts of her family’s decisions like a sponge, and she’d spent years taking what she’d learned and applying it like a coat of armor to deflect every bit of her own empathy. Her mother “feeling things” had been what was responsible for her mother feeling pain, and that was what had been responsible for the pain it’d brought upon her children.

So Arty had done her best to lock away her own feelings as a means of protection.

It was only after years of working with Johnni, almost a decade after they’d started their sessions and started dismantling what made Arty tick, that she’d started to let them back out again.

For the past few years she’d been rediscovering parts of herself she’d thought long dead. She’d rediscovered she had such a capacity for love, such a capacity for compassion and affection and
tenderness and hope. They were things that came with their own sacrifices, but they were ones more worthwhile than what she’d buried herself in growing up.

And she’d finally grown comfortable in expressing them.

Arty didn’t want to go back to that place she’d been in for so long.

It was dark and silent and lonely and full of trust issues galore.

It had taken her a long time to get where she was, and that was progress she didn’t want to throw away. She’d moved beyond that point in her life.

And she didn’t want to be scared either, because again: Brit was right. Brit was usually right.

Arty could die tomorrow in a freak accident and outlive him by years. And even if she didn’t, she’d have to watch him die from no matter which hill she chose to die on, as she’d been made so flagrantly aware earlier.

From now on, that truth was always going to be lingering over her. It was terrible, but inescapable, and no amount of burying her head in the sand would make it less so. She might as well peep behind the curtain to see if there was a chance she could get anything more out of her inescapable truth than pain.

Johnni had also been right with her hypothetical question. Arty didn’t know if she’d regret choosing to say yes or no somewhere down the line. But she did know she would regret being unable to say that it hadn’t been a decision fueled by fear.

She didn’t want to be scared of things.

She wanted to experience things.

She wanted to feel things.

Like it or not, he had definitely made her feel things.

And what could one date hurt? Truly, truly hurt? It couldn’t do more damage to her psyche than had already been done—and like Brit said (damn her) it wasn’t like she was locking herself into a contract by it.

Besides, she wanted to take him up on his offer to see if they were compatible.

Odds were, they weren’t.

No matter how someone sliced it, she couldn’t measure up to what he was probably accustomed to. Not in any way. Which meant the cosmos really had fucked up, and the brat in her wanted to know why.

She had a duty on behalf of all human-folk to uncover this mystery of the Clearly Mistaken Soulmate Debacle, and she’d do it for the Science.

Arty rolled over for the last time and reached for her phone on the nightstand.

With the smugness of goodbyes, she watched her self-preservation fly out the window and, taking a deep breath, sent out the riskiest text of her life.

Once it was done, she pulled the covers up to her chin and nodded with finality into her pillow.
‘Triple Dog Dare accepted, Asshole,’ she thought. ‘Sucks for you.’

* * *

Two hundred miles away, Tony Stark smacked his elbow into the undercarriage of the Audi R8 in his haste to get out from under the car. He hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours and his senses were shot, so maybe he was just imagining it, but he could’ve sworn JAY had just said he had an incoming message from his Mate. He was probably, definitely imagining it, being 4 A.M. and all, but he had to be sure.

It was a good sign when DUM-E didn’t try to blast him in the face with foam.

When he picked up the phone with a shaky hand and flipped it over, he had to blink. He rubbed at his eyes just to be sure, to make certain they were working properly. For all he knew he could’ve been seeing what he wanted to see in his semi-delirious state.

But it was there, illuminated clearly on the screen:

‘One date.’

Chapter End Notes

Minimal Tony this time folks, and for that I apologize. But fear not!

Next up: does Tony live up to his promise to disappoint?

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