Welcoming the Wolf, part 3

by DemonicReader

Summary

The B.A.R.F.-system works and everything is ready to begin the much awaited treatment, but...
Bonds between souls are questioned.
Tony and James make their first tentative steps toward freedom, when a 'ghost' from the past arrives.
Good omen? Bad omen? Time will tell...

Notes

Never thought this story would take me this far, but... here we are)
English isn't my Native language, so there will be mistakes there somewhere =.= I just know it)) feel free to let me know - feedback is important ;)

Translations of Russian speech is within these (...) 
P.S. The phrase James prompts Tony into saying is quite famous, and is from an old soviet era song dedicated to Yuri Gagarin's flight into space. There are lots of documentaries regarding the topic (in Russian, at least; maybe there are some in English too) and there are
recordings indicating that he indeed said that just before lift off... just without the hand waving) the cockpit of the rocket wouldn't allow such gestures) kind of became a phrase you say before venturing into the unknown, when you aren't sure how it will end...
Chapter 1

Tony Stark never thought much of Everett Ross: not before he became the Head of the Accords Council, not after. The social cycles they activated in were just too different: a CIA agent had next to nothing in common with a billionaire-playboy-philanthropist-slash-engineer-inventor. But then the Accords happened and they had to work on them together. The man turned out to be not so bad: witty, sarcastic… and he didn’t dwarf Tony out, because the billionaire was actually the taller one for a change.

The first B.A.R.F. session was scheduled on Monday, but they had to move it a couple of days further this week due to… what was it? Oh, yeah, an internal investigation.

Tony was livid.

In their ever changing world soulmates were always considered an epitome of stability – you do not doubt God’s wishes. If you were linked with somebody, it was till death do us part. But there also were hopeless cases, tragic cases… and cases that were considered unique.

In normal circumstances, what were the odds of them meeting, Bucky being born in 1917? Without the serum and cryogenic sleep, if they did meet someday, Barnes would have been a very old man, and, just to spice it up, another bombshell - it was not Barnes he was bonded to, but a soviet one-armed master assassin with a taste for classic literature and knives, who wasn’t even real… talk about go big or go home.

But they still asked him: was he sure? Maybe he made a mistake? Maybe he only thought he felt the things he felt? The nerve of these people…

President of the Accords Council Ross was adamant, however. Or they sort out their differences now, or… something bad will happen. He didn’t elaborate what, exactly, but definitely bad. The threats fell to deaf ears, because Everett just didn’t have it in him to look menacing, so Tony hadn’t let himself be intimidated… and made mental notes to consult with Pepper about the possibility of a plan B.

James is silent. Tony watches him disassemble, assemble and disassemble his favorite handguns, sharpen his knives using an old fashioned whetstone they found in Howard’s old workshop at the mansion, study old blueprints… no, the former Fist of Hydra wasn’t planning to off somebody. In their own way, these almost ritualistic actions were helping him cope.

Where Tony tinkered, James planned and prepared...

This evening they would be sitting in the same room as Steven fucking Rogers, Nat and Sam, with Rhodey standing guard, President Ross and Director Nick Fury a video call away. Strange would also be present – for medical and magical advice. The engineer was there simply as a B.A.R.F. operator, because in the time period they were all oh so interested in he was a kid, therefore, not useful…

So Tony went to that conference room, set up the equipment, instructed Friday. He won’t be petty, he will comply… and while he was leading this dog and pony show, his baby girl would be trashing what still remained of SHIELD servers, eradicating anything related to him, to James, to them both and their bond. No, ‘petty’ wasn’t what he felt at all – ‘out for blood’ was far more accurate…

“Все будет хорошо, Антоша (All will be alright, Antosha),” familiar hands, one colder than the
other, both in fingerless leather gloves, carefully embraced him from behind. “Мы прорвемся (We will survive this).”

“Oh, sugarplum, why are you so sweet? Comforting me so nicely…” Tony smiled, leaning into his Soldier’s chest. “Watch your six any day…”

The embrace around him tightened protectively, while warm lips kissed the spiky strands on the crown of his head.

“Liked that, beautiful…”

“Are you really ready to let people into your head?”

“No… and it is the exact opposite, solntse moyo (sun of mine), because it would be me dumping my memories on them.”

“Oh, haven’t thought about it from this perspective… want to give B.A.R.F. a test drive while we still have a modicum of privacy?”

“… something neutral?”

“Nah… let’s make it something fun instead!”

James kissed his hair again, and he could hear the smile in his voice when the assassin said in that joking/not joking manner:

“Your wish is my command… now bring me those glasses and let us get comfortable.”

“Bossy man… but because I love you, I will comply.”

So if that earned him a playful slap on the backside, it was no one’s business…

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When James said he remembered everything that fateful day in the bunker, turned out he wasn’t kidding. The man’s memory was like a Venus’s flytrap: once something caught his eye, the image of it would be trapped there forever. One third of the time such a feat could be considered a blessing, the other two thirds of the time, though, it was a curse.

“I remember wanting to show you how people celebrate New Year on the Red Square in Moscow. You never seemed to do any festive activities at home, when you were little,” said James, trying the virtual reality glasses on for size.

Tony was very proud of this particular invention; it not only performed the tasks it was designed for, but also looked stylish. James wearing them looked stylish: with his hair down and that ever present five o’clock shadow, grey-blue eyes looking at him over those modified black lenses… who would’ve thought teashades were his thing?

“We did have the Christmas Ball every year…”

“Not that kind of ‘festive’.”

“Well, what can I say… social status was important back in the day. Are you going to show me now?”

“I would like to. It was a rare occasion - to be sent to Moscow, especially this close to the end of the
year. I was given a time frame of seven days to complete my mission... I finished it in two and had more than enough time to wander,” the Soldier smiled, albeit sadly. “The last relatively peaceful winter of 1990-1991...”

A pang of old pain in the now cauterized wound was expected, so Tony didn’t pay it much thought.

“It just means that they knew dear old Dad made his important breakthrough and were waiting for the perfect moment,” Tony sighed and made himself comfortable on the couch cushions by his soulmate’s side. “You know, I could have been in the car that night. They were on their way to some gala... mother invited me to come too, but I was at MIT working on DUM-E’s code, stoned to the gills... glorious days! Let’s not repeat them again.”

“I should have been with you,” James paused. “But it seems that you can’t see soulmate related dreams while in cryo-sleep.”

“Well, technically, it isn’t even sleep, so... there was nothing you could have done to change... you know, I thought you ditched me at first, but when I read about how rejection affects soul marks (a very dubious article, let me tell you) and never saw any of the signs on mine I started thinking you died on me... or are lying in a coma somewhere, because the mark never showed signs of fading either,” Tony smiled, somewhat sheepishly. “Tried to find you, even wrote a search algorithm based on the few pieces of information I had.”

“Oh?” now James sounded intrigued. “Did it work?”

“Everything I make works, Snowflake, one way or another...”

“Thought so...”

“Truth be told, the first thing I tried tracking were weapon shipments. Backfired on me rather spectacularly... Then I remembered the knives you used. Turned out they were rather unique. Almost found you a couple of times! But I wasn’t Ironman, and there is only so much you can do with money and influence.”

“... and after?”

“I gave up... and gave in.”

“Not anymore.”

“Yeah, so... New Year in Moscow?”

James pretended he didn’t recognize this little question as a hint at changing the topic, and adjusted the glasses with what should have been a theatrical gesture.

“Remember Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, and his famous phrase, solnyshko?”

Tony stilled, radiating amusement and... bafflement? There was a chance, albeit a small one, that he understood wrong... and his Soldier wasn’t prompting him to speak Russian. Well, challenge accepted!

“Em... poehali (Let’s go)?”

The master assassin nodded in agreement, adding with a ready smile:

“И махнул рукой (and waved his hand)...”
When Steve and the others finally arrived they were greeted with beautiful snowy landscapes of the former USSR capital, alight with Christmas lights and laughter, joy and genuine cheer. The Captain stood frozen in the doorway, eyes wide in surprise and astonishment. Even Nat showed some degree of fascination – after all said and done, it was her homeland and she still missed it. Sam just watched slack jawed: he knew Stark was good with tech, but to think he was this good…

Colonel Rhodes just smirked.

“I gather, the equipment is ready, Tones?”

“Hey there, Rhodey-bear! Look at what we did! Isn’t it great?” Tony was all smiles and barely contained energy. Small white flakes of snow danced around him like a bunch of fireflies.

“Yeah, it is. But what is it?”

“Just a New Year I missed. James saved it for me.”

“Oh, good, but you should go there for real next time. Maybe bring back some oversized stuffed animals…”

“They don’t sell those in vending stalls in Russia, Colonel Rhodes, only in toy stores. It is mostly food, snacks and hot drinks. And by ‘hot’ I don’t mean ‘high degree alcohol’.”

“Even better! And don’t you think I don’t know how you stole your own plane to take off who knows where?”

Tony didn’t even flinch, poker-face perfect. His eyes, though, not obscured by red shades, were alight with laughter giving him away almost instantly.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Yeah right…”

“Better ring those numbers, jelly bean, because you are getting awfully smart on me all of a sudden… need something to keep you busy!”

“If you say so,” Rhodes still wore that smirk, but when turned to the engineer it became a lot more good-natured. “Friday, if you please…”

“With pleasure, Colonel” chirped the AI.

Rhodes, in the meantime, gestured towards the remaining empty chairs.

“Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen! I have a feeling it would take a awhile to shuffle through it all…”

They needed a very specific set of memories, which weren’t that many to begin with. James didn’t correct him, though. Better to leave the enemy guessing…

Ross answered the call almost immediately. Fury made them wait. The Director of SHIELD hadn’t changed much since the last time they saw each other: eyepatch, leather cape, scowl - all firmly in place.

“I thought you wanted to save your friend, Captain Rogers. Guess, I thought wrong…”

“With all due respect, Director, what exactly you intended to do with Sargent Barnes, once he was in
your custody?” Everett Ross went straight for the jugular. Tony’s respect for the tiny man grew.

“I believe that doesn’t concern you, President. It is a private matter.”

“Yes, it is, which is precisely why we’re here. I’ll have to ask again: what were you planning to do?”

“Sargent Barnes, in his current state, is a danger to society. We have all the necessary facilities to contain and help him. Including qualified psychological assistance.”

“It’s not Barnes you want to contain, but the Hydra assassin.”

“No, *him* we were planning to destroy.”

“Before or after you interrogate the Hell out of my soulmate, Nick?”

If looks could kill... well, he was lucky they couldn’t. James’s answering glare, directed at Fury, was just as potent.

“Stark.”

“Director.”

“For a genius you sure are easy to fool, boy.”

“Am I now? For the record, have you... even for the slightest moment... considered this option to be true?”

“No,” judging by how Director Fury’s face shifted into what Tony would have called a ‘resting poker face’, the spy sensed that he made a bet on the losing horse and now came the time to explain where the money went. “Because it’s impossible.”

James’s stare somehow got even colder. Unforgivable winter blizzards raged in those eyes, more blue than grey, whispering a long tale of cruelty and violence. A caged wolf, having had a taste of freedom, lost the desire to view the world through a set of bars ever again.

“… I could still finish it. Free of charge,” again that enigmatic joking/not joking tone, but Tony could bet his entire fortune on the ‘not joking’ half... and win.

“I won’t let you!”

“…sit down, Captain Rogers.”

“Like hell I will! He is openly threatening to murder people!”

“When I want to murder someone, I don’t waste time on threats. Ask Natalia, she knows what I mean…”

Nat, obviously, also sensed the ‘not joking’ vibes, because she looked a bit paler than usual. That surprisingly shut Rogers up. Apparently, the image of the Black Widow Natalia built here held no room for fear.

“Due to unique circumstances,” President Ross took the reins of the conversation in his hands once more. “And thanks to Doctor Stark’s unique technology, we have a unique opportunity to clarify any rising questions, including those that trouble Mister Rogers the most. Doctor Stark’s AI, Friday, will also cross-reference the information we’ll get from Sargent Barnes’s memories with the information we already possess to verify if it’s reliable enough. Shall we begin?”
There were no objections, so Tony put on his business face, pulled out the necessary information from the Files and with Friday’s help projected his findings in holographic form over the table.

“Hydra scientists called it ‘the Anomaly’ and the first mentioning of this ‘phenomenon’ appeared in the records they kept so meticulously around the early 1970s,” the engineer maintained a professional tone. “My mark fully appeared when I turned three, so it makes sense… it’s on my wrist for those who don’t know, so I needed time to grow into it. James must have gotten his when I was born, so now Snowflake has to travel back more than 45 years to that exact moment…”

The Soldier closed his eyes behind the dark lenses and concentrated, shuffling his memories like a deck of cards until he found what he was looking for…

The festive wintery cityscape faded into nothingness, and suddenly they found themselves in the middle of the desert. The night sky, inky black, was filled with stars bright enough to fascinate even the most rational of men. A small camp, hiding from the wind between two giant boulders, almost went unnoticed.

James sat there in his full Winter Soldier gear, save for the mask, trying to get sand out of his gun with little success, face blank, eyes dull. He paused in his methodical motions only to save his dinner (hot damn… is that a rat?!) from burning only to return to his monotonous work right after…

When at some moment he stopped moving altogether, it was a jarring contrast. Putting the now assembled gun aside, the man went eerily still as if listening to something far, far away. The light from the campfire danced on the plates of his metal arm: no star, no mark… empty. But then somewhere in the depths of the universe a puzzle piece fell into place… and that earlier statement was no longer true.

Tony always knew that MIT ruined his handwriting (more often than not you had to be fast in your note-taking which did little for finesse), but witnessing his own messy scrawl being engraved by an invisible force in such a beautiful piece of machinery that was James’s old arm felt oddly like desecrating a temple. And the mark… the mark read ‘Barnes?’.

The scenery changed again, throwing them into what looked like a laboratory, where people in white coats poked and probed at the silently sitting Soldier, panicked and angry. Someone makes a call, and an officer comes in, red Hydra skull-headed octopus adorning his shoulder. Tony is starting to get a bad feeling…

…he hates it when he’s right.

The officer takes a few moments to observe, to take the Soldier in, as if assessing a prized possession for damage. He examines the arm too…

A backhand comes seemingly out of nowhere, connecting with the left side of the Soldier’s face, painting it red from a split lip.

“Тебе известно, что означает эта метка? (Do you know the meaning of this mark?)”

“Нет (No).”

Another backhand, with more force this time. It actually makes James’s head turn a bit to the side. Tony feels sick.

“Ты знаешь, что означает эта метка? (Do you know the meaning of this mark?)”

“Нет (No).”
A punch this time, delivered to the stomach. That elicited a grunt.

“Меня предупреждали о тебе (I was warned about you). Думаешь, что самый умный здесь (You think, you are the smartest one here). Спрашивая в последний раз: ты знаешь, что означает эта метка? (I will ask one last time: do you know the meaning of this mark?)”

James’s answer was the same.

“Нет (No).”

The officer smiled… and waved to the guards that stood by the entrance, weapons ready.

“На повторную калибровку его (Send him to recalibration). И уберите эту дрянь (And get this filth off).”

The setting around them shifted again.

The Soldier dressed in civilian clothes this time was standing in front of a majestic looking old building. The plaque beside the big wooden doors read: “Публичная библиотека им. М. Ломоносова (M. Lomonosov public library)”. James looked thoughtful, as if calculating something in his mind, before entering. Several hours later, he all but ran out of there, eyes wide and haunted, filled with a mix of wonder and bewilderment. It was all gone when the handlers arrived to pick him up, though… but Tony had a strange feeling that this unsanctioned visit to the library was the first among many rebellious actions they were about to witness.

“James must have closed the bond on his end, because I haven’t felt a peep from him until the age of six. He was… angry.”

“Do you want to know why?” the Soldier’s voice was quiet.

“I’ve always wondered.”

“It is about the dog.”

That made him freeze, mind working around the new puzzle-piece, until it clicked, because, of course, ‘six’ and ‘dog’ had to lead to that…

“Still want to know, so… lay it on me, Snowflake!”

James did… and he didn’t pull his punches.

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It felt strange to remember and not participate, to watch himself live through those situations again… this time from the side. Strange, albeit not unwelcome. The books on psychology he found himself reading recently called it therapy by exposure.

Tony might have felt him at the age of six, but that doesn’t mean the Soldier hadn’t visited him before that: again mostly by accident in those few hours of sleep he was allowed to have.

He kept to the shadows mostly, watching the life of the Stark household from a distance. The Soldier saw how Maria Stark from a beautiful radiant woman transformed into an indifferent doll with a carefully masked drug addiction, saw how Howard Stark, haunted with the ghost of Captain America and his own genius, turned into an abusive father and a house tyrant… and saw the little boy with a foreign word on his wrist. Watching him, following him, was, perhaps, the most
interesting thing there…

He could say they built that robot dog together. Little Antonio (his mother often spoke with him in Italian, her mother-tongue) somehow subconsciously knew what pieces to pick, what metals to use for the ‘skeleton’, what – for the ‘muscles’ and ‘joints’, what bits to combine to create working inner electronics. James offered advice sometimes if the problem was related to areas he had profound knowledge in, murmuring quietly in Russian, albeit knowing the boy won’t hear, won’t understand… but the boy surprised him each time by hearing him without actually hearing. B.A.R.F. pictured them together, huddled over the body of a half built robot-pup: a dark semi-transparent figure clad in black leather and a mask and a small boyish one with a mop of unruly black curls dressed in ‘Captain America’-themed pajamas.

Somewhere in the room Steve Rogers made a strangled sound, trying to hold the sob in. The man was starting to understand what exactly he was trying to destroy, but, like with most of his mistakes, it dawned on him after the actual damage had been done.

“How interesting,” drawled Doctor Strange from his seat. “For you two to have soul dreams so early… your bond must be strong.”

“Isn’t it a common thing?” Tony was curious; he knew his fair share about soulmates (did his research when James disappeared), but there were always more mystic mambo-jumbo about them than solid facts. Maybe magicians saw the concept from a different angle?

“No, Mister Stark, it is quite rare, because it requires a very high level of compatibility.”

“Oh…”

“You can count yourself lucky.”

The memory wasn’t over, however. They built the dog, and little Antonio, feeling the weight of Captain America’s shield on his little shoulders already, ran to his father to show it, only to be shouted at (Maria, get him out of here! I’m busy, can’t you see?!), then dismissed. It hadn’t ended there, though, not today. Howard payed his son a visit later that evening, half a bottle of expensive liquid courage already consumed…

James was in the Siberian forest, running laps, when it hit him… and hit him hard. While his physical body was busy dodging a tree, his spirit was literally thrown across the globe into a familiar bedroom, because little Antonio was distressed, because he needed him…

The moment Howard hit his son for the first time (and B.A.R.F. showed not just the sad demise of the robotic puppy, but also what happened after) he personally signed himself a death wish – that much was clear to all parties present.

James remembered that feeling of all consuming rage all too well…

The Soldier was a creature of winter and pain, he was often told, a ghost stalking the shadows, silent and deadly. Even his wrath had an icy quality to it… or so they made him believe. Turns out they were right.

His spirit self’s eyes were blazing neon-blue, skin – unnaturally white and cracked in places, resembling a broken and glued together ceramic cup, with an eerie bluish-white glow seeping through from inside, shoulder length hair fading to greyish-white. Even his features not hidden by the mask sharpened somehow, changed…

He looked almost like a White Walker from the ‘Game of Thrones’ series, perhaps, a bit more
handsome, though, and less horned.

“Is that normal?” asked Sam in a loud whisper. Strange just shrugged, saying:

“The world of finer energies functions according to a set of laws that would seem a bunch of nonsense from our point of view and things there are often not what they appear at first glance. It would have been interesting to observe the original Mister Barnes’s soul – just to settle any lingering doubts. In the matters of the spirit, I can most certainly assure you, that there are no two souls alike.”

“And if a man has a split-personality disorder?” it was Colonel Rhodes who asked. Well, being called crazy wasn’t new. And he was… in a way.

“There would have been two of them – the spirit world is simple like that.”

“So Bucky… is really dead?”

“Yes… and no. If he had disappeared completely, Mister Barnes’s spirit form would be different,” the Sorcerer Supreme frowned. “It would seem… Hydra somehow managed to carve out what made this man ‘Bucky of the Howling Commandoes’, leaving the essence of James Buchanan Barnes intact and untouched, before filling this artificial void with… something else. Monstrous, surely, yet clever…”

Tony said nothing, but the genius’s knee was touching his under the table, a warm soothing presence. Colonel Rhodes cleared his throat.

“Is this enough evidence for you? If not, I propose we take a break.”

After a sequence of nods, the engineer flayed his hands in a parody for a grand gesture.

“Friday, baby girl?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Wrap it up.”

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They ordered cheeseburgers.

While Tony munched on those, James busied himself in the common kitchen… yes, that one. The room had been remodeled and refurnished. More sophisticated cooking appliances were also replaced. If it was high-tech before The Incident (the epic super-soldier show down had a name now), this time around Tony went for a more homey look… and built a semi-sentient toaster. James didn’t mind. He rather enjoyed when the little guy got creative.

“Are you in the mood for some experiments, Antosha?”

The genius paused, the second cheeseburger half way to his mouth.

“You want to feed me something strange looking again, sugarplum?”

“Maybe. Ever heard about ‘makarony po-flotski’?”

Fri obviously translated the unfamiliar term (his sunshine rarely went without an earpiece these days; partly due to security measures, but mostly because he wanted James to be comfortable speaking whatever language he wanted), and judging by the slightly confused expression he got lost
“Military food?”

“Not quite. A Russian dish said to have originated from the times of the late XIX - early XX century Imperial Navy. There is no concrete information; perhaps, it is even older. Practical, easy to make, yet satisfying, albeit lacks the restaurant finesse… like your cheeseburger.”

“Oh?” Tony was intrigued, shifting closer, leaving his still untouched burger behind. “How do you make it?”

“You are Italian, yes? May be offended by my disregard for pasta…” said the Soldier, while shuffling through the cabinets pulling out a big pot, a medium sized pan, some spices, salt and pepper, a bottle of sunflower oil…

“By blood only. I grew up in New York. Also there’s the fact that mom never cooked: it was always Ana, our house keeper, and when she passed away it was always Jarvis, our butler.”

“I remember them… good people, took care of you.”

“As much, as they could, anyway. After boarding school my teenage angst burned super nova levels of bright which caused me to become one hell of a ‘troubled youth’…”

“That I remember too… what was the name of that boy?”

“Oh shush! And his name was Ty… but nothing happened! You’ve ruined me for everybody else anyway…”

“Did I now?” the Soldier felt… extremely satisfied. Like after performing a challenging shot, but different somehow.

“Have you seen yourself, Snowflake? You’re gorgeous! Never mind sexy in all the right ways… I learned I’m into men too, after I watched you do that ‘murder-strut’ thing.”

“…murder-strut?”

“Well, you know… when you walk with intent… like this…” Tony moved back towards the entrance before trying to imitate something resembling a mix of a prowl and a fashion model style podium walk with a heavy dose of swagger… and nearly toppling over after two steps. “Damn! This is harder than it looks…”

James started laughing; couldn’t hold it in. Having fun still was a rather foreign concept, but how could it be anything else? His honest to god full body laugh startled Antosha at first, but soon they were both at it, cooking forgotten. Felt strangely liberating…

“Do you still like to dance?” honey-brown stared at him, warm and mischievous.

“You inviting me, doll?”

“Yeah, soldier-boy, show me what you’ve got…”

That’s how Steve found them: twirling around the dining area of the kitchen to the hot beats of Brazilian tango.

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The last time Tony danced was in… boarding school? Yes, probably, then. He was always made to play the ‘girl’ part during those lessons, because he was by far the smallest one out of all the attending students. Maybe that’s why, when James went down on one knee in front of him, reaching out in an unmistakably sensual gesture, the boy in him recognized the pose instantly…

Tango.

It used to always infuriate him: being the ‘girl’, being disregarded and underestimated, made him want to jump over his head. With James, though, he found he didn’t mind. The notion of soulmates was used as an excuse for far too many things, sometimes completely ignoring the people that made up the two halves that were to form a whole. James was a master assassin first, just like he had been a genius engineer first – underestimating anything wasn’t in their nature. Besides his Soldier already saw him at his worst and weakest… and let himself be seen at his worst and weakest in return.

Turns out, Hydra weapons have nightmares too…

Where Tony dreamt about drowning, space and fields of dead bodies in a distinctive red haze, James’s dreams were filled with electricity, ice and ever consuming helplessness that came after the Words.

*They tell me to kill you, Antosha… and no matter how much I thrash and scream and fight them… all I can do is obey…*

But Tony believed in him regardless, because he broke the programming once, for Steve… not ‘Captain America’ Steve, but the Steve from Before. He had more than enough incentive to break it again…

For now, though… they will dance.

“They might not teach cooking in assassin school, but they sure do teach dancing… standard ballroom?”

“Among other things. The Red Room, for example, was posing for a ballet studio.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. The girls were taught etiquette, table manners, various styles of dance, acting, a set of foreign languages, a number of sciences and literatures…not unlike the school you were in, except for one detail: after the usual lessons were over, they were sent to me… and I was very strict, because failure was not an option.”

“Was Nat really the best?”

“Yes. That is why she managed to graduate…” James paused. “I was never told of the cost the girls had to pay to do so, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“For Black Widows to be efficient in the field, there must not be any attachments. That means, no children.”

Tony was smart. He put two and two together.

“… It explains a lot of things, actually.”
“Hm?”

“Clint is married, did you know? Has three kids, and Nat often stays with his family, at their farm in Iowa… which I wasn’t supposed to know about.”

“It is he who brought her to SHIELD, yes?”

“I think so.”

“That is why they are such a good team. If she should ever choose between SHIELD and him, SHIELD would be at a big disadvantage. Barton would not defect, though…”

“Why do you think so?”

“The roots of his loyalty run deep. At some point in the past, Nickolas Fury was the one who did the same for him.”

“…I don’t blame any of them, you know. Not really. They had their orders, obviously… but it still stings. I made him that bowstring…”

“Ah…”

“Couldn’t rip through it, right? That was me.”

“The hair tie is of similar material?”

“Better.”

The music changed, signaling the end of one song and the beginning of another. James led him through a series of turns and lifts, allowing Tony to do some fancy legwork of his own before dipping him…

… and that’s when they saw Steve hovering there, in the doorway, looking both quizzical and flustered at the same time.

“I’m… sorry? For interrupting… never knew you could dance, Tony… especially, like that…”

“Benefits of staying at a fancy-ass boarding school for rich kids for two years, what can I say… you need something?”

“No… I mean, yes… I wanted to apologize… for everything.”

Talk about awkward…

James carefully lifted him back up, before setting him upright; the Soldier’s hand a warm grounding weight on the small of his back.

“Oh… that’s nice, but… I don’t really do the ‘forgive and forget’ thing…”

“I know, you understand why I did it, so… why? You are a good man, Tony! I know you are! And I admit I made a mistake… and had to pay for it. Why won’t you just… let it go? So we could be a team again, a family, like before.”

For a second there Tony was rendered speechless. James’s expression remained neutral, but the bond between them radiated an emotional equivalent of unimpressed. When he gathered his wits a few moments later, his voice was level and his words measured:
“Steve, it won’t ever be ‘like before’, because I don’t trust you ‘like before’. We never had our ‘till the end of the line’ moment, because from the very first seconds you saw me, I was already labeled as someone who won’t lay himself on a barbed wire to help others cross. I had to nearly die in that wormhole to change your view of me for the better. I still wasn’t close to being worthy, though, just barely tolerable. Then Ultron happened… and I switched categories again: from spoiled-rich-boy-Tony to dangerous-genius-who-can’t-be-trusted-with-information-Tony, because not even God knows what he’ll do! For the record, that fight in the bunker could have been avoided altogether, if I had time to process the news that my parents were killed by Hydra. But you didn’t tell me… and here we are.”

“… is there anything I can do to fix this?”

“We are still colleagues, Steve, but that’s all we’ll be. SHIELD still has a five year contract with Stark Industries, so I will still be in charge of your gear and weapon design, but once that ends… I don’t think SI would be taking another. I would rather build artificial limbs for veterans and disabled children instead.”

“I… see.”

“But we have a Mad Titan on his way, hunting for the so called Infinity Stones (I’ve spoken to Brucie-bear, don’t look so surprised; the official briefing for the UN won’t be ready for another few days, so the world is still in the dark), so peaceful life in retirement will have to remain a dream until we beat him. This fight will be unlike any other, Steve. Focus on that.”

***

Thursday morning greeted the billionaire-former-playboy-philanthropist with a mouthwatering smell of fresh waffles and coffee. That actually made him pause. Typical American breakfasts weren’t really James’s style, his main argument against them being: how could you feel full from a bowl of cereal and a glass of juice? If you think about it, how indeed…

So Tony crept into their workshop kitchenette, ready for anything, including little pink elephants, only to find none other than Sam Wilson, sitting across from James at their small dining table, cradling a steaming Hulk themed mug in his arms. The man looked… lost.

“Good morning, solnyshko,” the Soldier left his seat only to greet him with an affectionate kiss on the tip of his nose, effectively reducing the billionaire to a pool of bubbly goo… he might have purred.

Sam masked a knowing smile behind a gulp of coffee. Bastard…

“Hi, Tony! Sleep well?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe – I impersonated a log… might have offended Snowflake a bit, because I just know he had something grand planned for us. But instead of having hot kinky sex with my fella, I stayed up all night designing new arrows for Hawkass… Not that I’m not happy to see you, Birdbrain 2.0, but you’re not the most common sight around here, so… what gives?”

James just shook his head, amused, and went to arrange something breakfast-ish for Tony. The engineer parked his pajama clad bottom on the still warm chair cushion, making grabby hands towards the coffee pot. Sam, bless his kind soul, poured him a mug… yep, the red and gold one, with ‘I love Ironman’ written on the side.

“Actually, I’m here to ask for advice. Thought that, maybe, James could help me with a patient of
mine. You see, I started working as a counselor for the VA again, got myself a transfer from the center in DC to one of the local ones. Turns out they have been looking for a decent specialist for years,” Sam took a sip of his coffee. “There is this guy. His sister brought him for therapy a couple of weeks ago. At first we thought it was just the language barrier, the guy being Russian and all, but it’s not that he doesn’t talk at group sessions (such things take time), but later I learned that he doesn’t talk to anyone… at all. So I started digging: called his sister, talked to her, found his medical records, tried talking to the man myself, and you can probably guess how well that went. The center specializes in PTSD treatment, one of the best in the state, so they brought him here, hoped that here he would get help. Not to say that therapists in Russia are bad at what they do, but something happened… something that they couldn’t pull him out from. So I asked James for help…”

“You want him to talk to the guy?”

“Yeah. Maybe he will notice something that we all missed.”

“Oh…”

“What is his name?” it seems, the Soldier has made a decision.

“Arseniy Kotov.”

“Oh, a cat person!”

Sam shot him a questioning look to which Tony smiled.

“Fri usually translates for me, and ‘kot’ is a Russian word for ‘cat’. Kinda funny.”

“If you say so…”

James drank his tea looking thoughtful.

“You want me to accompany you to the center to look at him? And nothing else?”

“Looking would be a good start,” Sam nodded. “Have you been to a VA center before?”

“No.”

“Then you should probably be prepared to see a lot of traumatized people: psychological trauma, physical trauma, more often than not a mix of both. Iraq, Afghanistan, believe it or not Vietnam…”

“World War II?”

“No, although I’ve seen some of them visit: to talk, to share their life experience.”

“Do you want to do it today?”

“If you don’t have other plans, any help would be much appreciated, because at this point… I honestly don’t know what to do.”

James just nodded, before looking up to Tony in silent question as if asking permission. Tony gave him an encouraging smile.

“You have a life too, James. Go for it! And be careful… I don’t want to lose you again.”

***
The ride to the center had been mostly silent. Sam was in the driver’s seat. The Soldier surveyed the slowly changing scenery from the seat beside him. Once they reached the city, time stopped… in some places almost literally.

Morning traffic: a horrifying enemy of all those ‘office plankton’ types… and a valuable ally, if you are in the mood to hunt some ‘crab’.

James smirked. Sam eyed him cautiously.

“Do I need to know?”

“You’ll sleep better, if you didn’t…”

That startled a somewhat awkward laugh out of the Falcon.

“Okay…can I ask you something?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Is there a difference: between our military and the Russian one? The basics are essentially the same everywhere, but I have a feeling that I’m missing something… possibly something important.”

“There is always a difference, Mister Wilson…”

“Sam is fine.”

“…Sam. The mentality is different, for one. Russia is a big country, so is the USA, but this land has an ocean to protect it. Russian people do not have such a luxury, never had, so they fight: against external enemies, internal enemies, spiritual downfall, harsh climate conditions and against themselves. This builds up character,” James paused. “Not always in a good way… that is why Hydra was able to find asylum within the USSR military structure so easily.”

“You mean… they knew?”

“Some did. The Party Heads thought they were using Hydra to gain an advantage in the Cold War, while in reality it was Hydra who was using them. The majority of the soldiers and lower rank officers I saw didn’t even question what were they guarding. Those who questioned tended to disappear.”

“… you saw that happen.”

“Yes. It was me, who had to kill them in the end. I will never forget the first one. I doubt you will like this story, though.”

Sam gave him a wry smile.

“Counselor, remember?”

“It was before Tony. Ten or fifteen years of waiting for my sunshine to be born into this world. When they broke Barnes… there wasn’t much human left afterwards. I was… feral. Killed anyone who approached the cage they kept me in: scientists, technicians, soldiers. Soon guarding my cage was considered the worst punishment around the base. Until Sergey… he was kind: sneaked in treats, hummed songs or recited poetry by heart in a whispering manner while standing guard, talked about his family, the books he read, places he’d seen… he pulled me from the edge. A nineteen year old boy, he wasn’t very subtle… didn’t know how to be.”
“Someone saw him?”

“Yes. Many thought it was funny at first, but later, when it became obvious that I followed his orders better than those of my appointed handler, he vanished… only to be thrown into my cage several days later more resembling a bloody piece of meat than a man: no arms, no legs, no eyes, no tongue, injured and abused. But he still kept whispering, knowing I’ll understand… Все хорошо (It’s okay)... Ты не сделал ничего плохого (You did nothing wrong)...”

“And here I thought I couldn’t possibly hate Hydra more than I already do…”

“They wanted a monster. They got what they wished for.” The Soldier’s eyes turned sharp. “I told you this not to evoke pity, Sam. Arseniy Kotov does not want pity either. My sunshine would say ‘no kiddy gloves’, because ‘broken’ does not mean ‘sick’.”

“Huh… Tony is a wise man… surprisingly.”

“He hides it well.”

“The problem is… we don’t even know how deep the fractures are!”

“If there are any at all…”

Sam stilled.

“You think it may not be PTSD?!”

“What brought him in your care in the first place is his ‘strange’ behavior. It could be anything… including PTSD.”

***

Sam was scared. The man who jumped out of planes on a regular basis should have a solid core… should have, but didn’t.

Sam was scared: of the Soldier and a little bit of James, but fought it viciously, because you do not show your fear in front of a wild animal. In truth, the animal in him usually doesn’t care… it attacked regardless stinks its prey of fear or not.

“Do not go to the center yet. Let us have a cup of coffee somewhere… safe.”

“I look like I’ve seen a ghost, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do,” James resumed his people watching activities. “Better than the last psychiatrist I was assigned to: that woman ran screaming.”

“You did it on purpose, didn’t you…”

“I can fake any level of sanity or insanity I want. And she was digging for blackmail. Can’t have that, can we…”

Sam just shook his head and pulled over at the nearest Starbucks. The coffee he brought back was refreshingly awful.

The VA center resembled a hybrid of a field hospital and a mental institution. Some of the local inhabitants lacked an arm, some – a leg, some – both legs and wheeled around on wheelchairs. The majority – young and gaunt and miserable, left to wander in a black tunnel with no light on other
end. Most of them wore soul marks, black letters looking like they were gnawed at by some starved beast… signs of rejection.

Angels in nurse uniforms with tired smiles tried to ease the darkness ruling this place. They were fighting a losing battle.

Sam was greeted with smiles and small talk. James shocked the apathy out of anybody who dared to approach by his presence alone. Sargent James Barnes, it seems, after all the hearings, interviews and public statements, had a certain reputation in the veteran community, so the assassin soon found himself sitting on a yoga mat in front of a small crowd of former soldiers, blue Henley-shirt off, metal arm in the open, the tank top doing almost nothing to hide the scars…

They shared stories: about the wars they fought, about the friends they lost. Funny stories were told too, always followed by animated gestures and loud sound effects. Tears and laughter mixed together, easing the general gloom a bit. James promised to visit at least once a week: not because it would boost the image of the Avengers a bit due to positive press, but because he had a strong suspicion that there was no one left to care.

His sunshine would be proud.

“That was… unexpected,” judging from the tone of voice Sam was thrilled. “You were awesome!”

“I was a sniper before and a Sargent before that, so I know where to look to see certain things. They needed to remember they were still alive and that there are long years of life still ahead of them, so I gave them something to think about, an alternative to consider. Does Steve attend such meetings?”

“As far as I know, although the ‘meetings’ he is invited to are a lot fancier… like Tony Stark levels of ‘fancier’ if you know what I mean.”

“Galas, balls and receptions?”

“Something like that. The donations the Avengers usually collect during those night-outs are later used for various charities.”

“Hm.”

“You didn’t know? There is also Avengers-themed merchandise (like your tacky Ironman socks) and the money from that also goes to various charity funds.”

“Clever. Good press too.”

“It’s not always about ‘good press’, James.”

“Funny, because if one considers the amount of work needed to be done and the funding this endeavor receives, it can’t be anything, but ‘good press’,” the Soldier smiled, a cold crooked thing that reeked crazy; made Sam wonder just what Tony sees in this man, what loves him for. “I may not be as good with numbers as Antosha, but I do count very-very well.”

“You think we should be doing more…”

“It is really not my place to offer advice. I could only offer my observations. Shouldn’t we be visiting your patient?”

“Oh. He wasn’t with the others, so there’s only one other place he might be in: the back garden.”
“He likes plants?”

“I think it’s the smells that do it for him, have no idea why, though.”

“Let us find out then…”

***

The man was sitting on a bench, surrounded by flowers and grass and trees, eyes closed, face unreadable. Deep inhale, a small pause, a slow exhale. Long hair that went several inches past his shoulders looked more rusted than red, eyes a dull green color. Scars littered the right side of his face, neck and scar tissue disappeared under his T-shirt. The right sleeve was empty.

James was on alert the second he saw that face. Sam noticed which sent him on alert as well.

“James?”

“I know that man.”

“Okay…”

“You don’t understand. I know that man… because he is Hydra too.”

“Oh shit! We should call the guys!”

“No.”

“Why?”

“He came here. Why? He lost his arm. When? He doesn’t speak. Why? So many questions that need answering, and he is still your patient. You took an oath, so you must hold to it and help him recover.”

Sam stilled, turning from panicked to pensive. He may have been Falcon… once upon a time, now, though, he was more. It must’ve seemed odd for him, that it was the Winter Soldier of all people who pointed out the obvious.

“… so what’s the plan?”

“It never changed… much. We will look, but now we will also talk.”

The Hydra agent payed them as much attention as one might pay a fly. Rusty hair, lightless eyes. Wilson didn’t even register on his radar. The Soldier, though…

When they came near, he closed his eyes, took another deep breath, as if familiarizing himself with their scent, and kicked the earth from under their feet, figuratively speaking, by saying:

“Жду приказов (Awaiting orders).”

***

When James came back with a ‘friend’, Tony wasn’t overly surprised. He felt it through the bond: trepidation, contemplation, amusement… which flared with all sorts of danger signs when his better half saw something… someone who riled him up enough to cause a storm like that. And now that mysterious ‘someone’ was sitting on his couch, in his workshop, a husk of a man, playing fetch with DUM-E… because they told him to. Between the two of them it was a bit tragic to see the little robot
as the ‘alive’ one of the pair.

Tony and James stood side by side and watched him from their places by the stove. Tony held a mug full of steaming coffee. James, faithful to his style, preferred tea.

“So… Arseniy Kotov. Is that even his real name?”

“As much as ‘Natasha Romanoff’ is Natalia Romanova’s real name.”

“… but he is no Widow.”

“No… because he is a Wolf Spider,” James took a solemn sip of his tea; God knows how a sip of tea could be solemn, but his Soldier managed it. “After the… booming success of the Red Room, the Heads of Hydra decided to go further and build themselves more Winter Soldiers, using the serum I took and some of their own research, but unlike the Black Widow Program, the Wolf Spider Program didn’t end well…”

“How come this is the first time I’m hearing about this? Me being me that is… the person who hacked into Pentagon data bases on a dare. Thanks to my favorite sugarplum, I could be officially named the resident Hydra File expert by now!”

“Hydra likes to record successes, not failures.”

“Figures… are you going to tell me?”

“Only if you want to hear it, solnyshko. It is not a very cheery story.”

“Well, we have Sunny there, who imprinted on you like a duckling, to look after now, so that would be real nice… to know, I mean.”

James nodded.

“You remember those five frozen Soldiers Zemo killed in that bunker, yes? Former Wolf Spiders, they were injected with the serum your father developed. Already loyal to the cause, all they needed was training. So I trained them. The serum gave them all super-soldier qualities, but made them aggressive…to the point that they started to scare the Handlers.”

“You could beat any of them one on one, but if they gang up on you, five on one…” Tony calculated the odds… and frowned. “Keeping them in cryo-sleep was a necessity or was Hydra just waiting for the right equipment to be invented? Like they did with you…”

“Perhaps both, but we will never know, because they are dead.”

“Hm… what concoction did they inject Sunny with then? Some knock-off?”

“They took my blood often enough.”

“The scientific division tried replicating Zola’s work most likely. The old man must have passed away by then otherwise he would have jumped at the idea. The scariest thing, however, is that it obviously worked!”

James nodded again, before offering his soulmate a wry smirk.

“I was sent to assassinate your father sometime after their version of the serum proofed itself useless, not before… They took boys from different orphanages across the country, trained them using the methods perfected in the Red Room, then when they were more or less of age, injected them with
their version of the serum. It seems it needed a number of very specific biological markers to successfully trigger the changes: approximately, a one in a hundred chance. This boy, Arseniy, was the only survivor in his group, but he still turned out… wrong.”

“Wrong… how?”

“After all the trouble they’ve had with my ‘glitches’, a compliant obedient Soldier would have been very much appreciated. From what I understood from the fragments I’ve heard, they overdid it. Following orders was all he was capable of.”

Tony could just stare. The far wall of the workshop never seemed so interesting before… and if he wanted to pin it down with a hard and merciless glare then it probably deserved it. With no hint of warm honey-brown in sight Tony Stark looked every inch the Merchant of Death the media tried labeling him as. If they only knew…

His eyes strayed to the couch, landing on the young (he looked no older than thirty… on the outside at least) man and easing a bit with new understanding. DUM-E chose this very moment to return with the ball firmly caught in his claw and beeping excitedly, and for a second there he thought he saw the redhead’s otherwise blank features soften in a barely there smile.

The Soldier continued:

“Because I trained him, he was ordered to refer to me as his commanding officer. He never let that order go. Even after the wipes, when everything else faded away, that particular order seemed to… stick, therefor rendering him useless for anything else.”

“Knowing these people that would mean… what… termination?”

“Yes.”

“But he survived… again. And you didn’t report him.”

“No, I didn’t. And he remembered that. And now we are going to war again…”

It was Tony who nodded this time; he began to understand the strange logic which ruled the mind of his favorite assassin… or assassins, plural, because, let’s face it, Arseniy wasn’t going anywhere.

“… and wars are fought by soldiers. As for Sunny: is there a chance for him to recuperate back to being at least somewhat norml-lish?”

“I don’t know, but with Sam as his therapist… maybe. And Sam is discrete.”

“I can keep a secret too, sugar bean!”

“I know you can, dusha moya, that is why I trust you with all of mine… and am happy to be trusted with a lot of yours.”

Blush? What blush? Nope, nothing to see here, folks!

…who was he kidding?

“… flatterer.”

***

Saturday came like a breath of fresh air after a particularly nasty storm and with it the first B.A.R.F.
Fucking finally…

Tony as tired as he was would have done a victory dance, but the Avengers had fight to the death with yet another giant robot just yesterday (Power Rangers style this time) and he had more bruises and sprains that he could count. James probably had more, though. This time round Steve actually included the Winter Soldier into his battle strategy. The billionaire managed to keep his cool till the end, holding onto his desire to protect his soulmate with an iron fist to keep it inside and out of the fight.

Sunny… or Senya (Russian names had such interesting shortenings sometimes… and Arseniy just reminded him of the word ‘arsonist’) watched the whole ordeal from the workshop. Friday took a liking to him almost instantly which was, honestly, a bit alarming, but the former Hydra operative used his rather impressive security clearance rarely: mainly on library visits and garden wanderings. Judging by the distressed looks they got upon return, hiding the blueprints for yet another metal arm on the top shelf of his virtual closet was wistful thinking. He’d need combat armor too; the word ‘arsonist’ oddly inspiring…

“You ready there, Snowflake?”

The Soldier answered with a curt nod. The virtual reality glasses already hid his eyes… were they grey? Or were they blue? Or a mix of both? Can’t tell now…

Tony sighed and willed himself to concentrate on the task at hand.

As soon as Sam saw the Hulk-proof chamber, he vetoed the idea of performing B.A.R.F. sessions there on the spot. Not a psychologically healthy environment, he said, so… they ruled that option out choosing an empty workshop just above Tony’s own instead. The room was large enough, secure enough and the observers if huddled in one of the far corners weren’t obvious at all. Sam kept it professional. Sunny just pulled a ninja on them and stayed out of sight. Friday still found him, though, lying in wait in one of the nearby air ducts, guarding James’s back.

The best, the worst and the neutral – here we go…

“B.A.R.F. is based on a semi-learning algorithm, not quite on AI level, even DUM-E has more complex code lines than this baby, but it still needs to learn first, so let’s give it something to learn from… Snowdrop?”

“Understood. I’ll show you something good…” a leer and accent combination, always a killer in Tony’s book.

“You do know I have several sex tapes with my name on them, right?”

“Remind me to go hunting later.”

“Going all possessive on me, are you, sugarplum?”

“Never liked to share.”

“Guys,” Sam chimed in, embracing the awkward. “Focus now, dirty talk later.”

“Hush you!” but Tony was smiling as was James in his own, subtle way. It was never about the facial expressions with him – you can’t read James if you can’t read body language very-very-very well.
“Go for it, solnyshko.”

The engineer pushed a few keys on the holographic keyboard and the simulation was on...

The sight of summer Siberian wilderness was... breathtaking. An array of greens, warm browns, barely there greys, rare sprinkles of color. Moss covered rocks resembled ruins, trails were obsolete and the trees could have put a cinematic elven forests to shame.

Tony felt a warm fuzzy feeling bloom in his chest, right behind the arc reactor – he remembered this one. The best damn day of his life! He never knew the Soldier thought the same...

“Wait!” a breathless boyish scream nearly made him jump; had his voice always been this squeaky? “Please, wait!”

A tall dark figure, a shadow among others, stilled and turned around, scanning the nearby bushes for...

Yep, found him. Tony… or a kid version of him stumbled through the underbrush making far too much noise for a semi-transparent entity and with no grace to save his life. He was eleven here, boarding school was still a couple of years away, from a time when red pajama sets with tiny yellow rockets were still considered trendy. He was also rocking a pair of stripped woolen socks (hand knitted by Ana Jarvis, one of her last gifts) and a case of notorious bedhead… cute, if you don’t pay attention to the hand shaped bruise already darkening against the pale skin of his right wrist.

The Soldier waited. Clad in his usual uniform and muzzle, armed with his usual weapons… what was unusual was the backpack he carried. Tony remembered being curious, but too afraid to ask and remembered looking for signs of irritation or anger in those blue eyes… and finding none. His soulmate didn’t seem to care that he was a ‘dumb kid’, expressing nothing but mild amusement and hints of fondness at his antics. He was a man of few words, but somehow, when he actually spoke, his words were the right words, even if Tony had to stumble through strange sounds from a land several thousand kilometers away.

“This is stupid… I’m a ghost! I should be able to keep up just fine!” huffed kid Tony trying to brush off grass and leaves from his pants and jacket, unsuccessfully, then looked around. “Are you on a… mission?”

The Soldier nodded, solemn.

“You should run…”

That earned him an inquiring look… and Tony, the older one, suddenly understood why: the words were unfamiliar. ‘Mission’ and ‘миссия’ did sound similar, so the Soldier must have made a logically based guess. James wasn’t kidding about the language part. Little Tony noticed too… and chose the alternative route: he pointed at the man, then at the trees and then mimicked a running man. The Soldier nodded again, a bit slower this time, before answering:

“Нет (No).”

“Why?”

Again he picked up the intonation, not the words.

“Нельзя (It is forbidden).”

Now it was Tony’s turn to look and feel out of his league and the Soldier’s turn to explain. He
pointed at himself, the trees, made a walking man impersonation with his fingers… and tapped the handgun hidden in his thigh-holster with his metal hand, before making a shooting gesture with his fingers.

“Oh…”

He wasn’t done though. The same metal fingers gently touched his shoulder, impersonated a walking man again and again the shooting gesture.

“Me?”

“Да (Yes),” this was followed by a nod, hoping the boy would understand, wanting the boy to understand. Tony, being a child genius, did… and some other things too.

“I won’t ask again,” and to get his point across he mimics a sign of zipping his lips.

Blue eyes sparkled with fondness when the older man reached down to run the gloved fingers of his right hand through semi-transparent curls in a light caress.

“Умница, малыши Антонио (Clever boy, Little Antonio).”

And just like that his child self was as red as his pajama jacket. Praise was such a rare occurrence in his life that he jumped at the barest of scraps thrown his way! A pathetic sight…

“Пойдем (Let’s go). Я хочу показать тебе кое-что интересное (I want to show you something interesting).”

That snapped him out of it, because his soulmate was walking again, a lot slower than his usual stride, a veritable sign he should follow. About twenty minutes in it became pretty obvious that they weren’t making much progress journey-wise. Problem found – problem solved. Bonus: little Tony got one hell of a piggy-back ride…

The Soldier was fast, the additional weight of the armor, weaponry, backpack and one free spirit, holding on for dear life onto its shoulder-straps doing nothing to hinder him. He knew this forest, he understood this forest and the forest knew and understood him. No snapped twigs, no rustled leaves, no scrapes on moss covered boulders. Birds continued to sing, animals went upon their daily business…

And then there was a cliff.


The Soldier only quickened his pace, his stance transforming from a rather relaxed jog into a deadly sprint, eyes narrowing on a patch of sky above the edge. The boy all but plastered himself across his shoulders, clinging to his back as if it would help reduce air resistance and accelerate them even more… ever the engineer’s son.

One final step, one last push… and a leap of faith which hadn’t ended in a hay-filled cart somewhere below, bringing them closer to the cloudy blue instead...

There was a parachute hidden in the pack.

“So cool!” little Tony was breathless, cheeks flushed pink, eyes bright with excitement. “You’re so cool!”
The Soldier laughed… for the first time in nearly three decades. A harsh scary sound, but…

_Theirs._

The simulation faded. James took off the glasses, eyes resembling ancient ice, while Tony checked the readings.

“She got it. One down - two more to go!”

“… perfect.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

New days lead to new discoveries...
The Rogues are still plotting, Sam is so done...
... and the Soldier discovers boredom.

Chapter Notes

Another session, another chapter...
and a great number of kudos to fellow writer ali_aliska, who used the idea of arc reactor
jewelry first) a truly beautiful idea)
feedback is much welcome)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His hands were shaking. Well, correction: his left hand was shaking and not in a good way. Tomorrow they will be moving onto the more… hard (read: gruesome, nightmare inducing…) parts of their shared pasts. Life between ten and twenty one wasn’t exactly cotton candy despite what many might think...

James was his light. His first light. Even Pepper for all her glory and badass never moved from second place. His Soldier was irreplaceable. That is the reason why his disappearance felt like his heart had been torn out… that is why when Obie finally did it, Tony wasn’t really that surprised, because he already knew how it would feel.

When he met James in Berlin, he didn’t recognize him, because the soulmate in his dreams was always wearing a mask and that man wasn’t… and Tony still didn’t speak Russian, so how was he supposed to know that ‘Зимний Солдат’, a name he’d heard so many times in different bases across the world, and ‘The Winter Soldier’ Steve and Nat referred to, were the same person?.. The arm, though. That should have triggered him… but didn’t. They were all so concentrated on ‘Bucky’ that he totally missed it!

For that particular fuck up Tony would blame himself till the end of days…

“Alone today, Stark?” Clint Barton appeared seemingly out of nowhere; not the vents, those he made essentially ninja proof. “No ‘guard dog’?”

Tony quirked an unimpressed eyebrow at him.

“James doesn’t fight my battles for me, Hawk-ass. You’re here… why? Old Pirate told you to or is it just you trying to be a decent human being?”

The archer scratched his head, suddenly uncomfortable.
“…a bit of both?”

“At least you didn’t offer useless apologies…”

“Steve put his foot in his mouth again, huh?”

“Something like that… so?”

“I was wondering… if your techno-magic can help with Hydra brand brainwashing, maybe it’ll help with Loki’s spells too?”

For a moment Tony just stared at him: former friend, once again teammate, spy… and, somewhere along the lines, victim of abuse. The archer’s easy-going nature masked it well, but underneath it all, was trauma he wouldn’t poke with a stick of any length.

“I won’t lie to you, you don’t deserve that shit, but I really don’t know. I don’t even know if it will help James!”

“Whoa, easy there…”

“Sorry… just stressed. My coffee stash in the shop ran out… didn’t want to disturb James by rummaging the cupboards. The man finally fell asleep.”

“Didn’t you do the happy memories yesterday?” Clint was clearly puzzled.

“My Snowflake doesn’t have ‘happy memories’ the way we do. It’s not ‘good days’ and ‘bad days’ for him – it’s more like relatively good hours and hellish years. Now he is re-living it all one memory at a time, and we are about to dive into deep, deep waters…”

“You’re worried about him…”

“Why are you surprised? It’s a perfectly normal thing to do…” anger, dark and ugly, already present courtesy to his earlier musings, reared its head, but Stark men were made of iron, so he held an iron grip on it. “Or… does SHIELD think otherwise?”

“They… still consider him a threat, yes. Nat… is difficult about the issue, since she actually knew the man. I, on the other hand, can’t seem to puzzle out the real picture, because what I’ve seen so far and what I’ve heard so far just doesn’t add up!” Barton actually scowled. “Where is the truth, Tony?”

“Wow, a tough question… I personally think that the truth lies somewhere in between. He is who he is being the Fist of Hydra and all, but, at the same time, that isn’t all he is. Did you know he taught me to fight?”

“You were bullied?”

“My father being filthy rich didn’t exactly save me from public humiliation in boarding school. Having a big mouth didn’t exactly help matters either. The first few months were a special sort of hell… and then I got beat up in a bathroom, pretty badly. I hid what I could, but one of the nastiest bruises was on my face, so when James saw it I thought I’d see him in my dorm room when I wake up the next morning, in the flesh, because he would high jack a plane and come break some necks! He was the only one who saw past the whole ‘fell down the stairs, clumsy me’ act,” Tony let out a humorless laugh. “I was thirteen, as big as a mouse, about just as vicious and with a muscle definition of a soggy noodle – if this isn’t prime assassin material than I don’t know what is.”

Clint looked both impressed and unimpressed at the same time.
“That… I didn’t know. And I suspect… not many do?"

“No, and if you as much as peep about this to Fury I just might have to kill you, agent Barton… Anyhow, you can’t do much in that ghost-like state soulmates find themselves in, plus the language barrier really sucks (couldn’t find even a flimsy English-Russian dictionary in that boarding school library, can you believe it; like we weren’t in the middle of the Cold War or something), but the important bits still made it through. You see, according to the Soldier, your mind is your greatest weapon. He was right… in the end.”

“… okay?”

“Loki might have messed you up, but you pulled through. And I have something that could help you with the mind control.”

“Doctor Strange made some charms?”

“Nope, I did. But he checked them and approved them.”

“That must be… a good thing?”

Tony huffed and moved from the living room he was moping in to the workshop, gesturing for Hawkeye to follow. He left the archer on the other side of the blast doors darkened out by blackout mode, before creeping in and towards one of his workstations where in an intricate wooden box the ‘charms’ were hidden.

His newest invention! He miniaturized the arc reactor to fit in his chest, why not miniaturize it further? James’s arm needed a power source (or several) as well as his future ‘Bleeding Edge’ armor, so the genius put his mind to it and made a breakthrough, albeit in a totally different field.

Tony Stark’s experience with brainwashing was brief, but varied. First, Loki and his glow stick of destiny, then Wanda with her red hue of doom. While hers worked, his for some reason didn’t. Took him exactly two minutes to figure out why. The new element in his arc reactor, his father’s legacy, canceled out the powers of the Mind Stone… somehow. He removed the reactor and wham! Wanda’s red mist managed to creep through, enslaving his mind.

No way in hell that would be happening again: not to him, not to James, not to Sunny… not to anyone he cares about. Clint would have to remain the only exception.

“Solnyshko?” the Soldier’s voice was quiet and a little rough from sleep.

Oops!

Busted…

“Yes, cuddle muffin?”

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, nothing…”

“…”

“That creepy meaningful silence is just… creepy, so I’ll come clean (this time!), and say that I’m… just giving one of my pendants to Clint.”

“Oh…”
“You know what happened to him prior the Battle of New York, right?”

“…yes.”

“And I hate magic too, but there isn’t anything else, apart from an actual magic barrier, that could protect him from that. If he talks, though, I’ll let you kill him.”

The shuffling in the darkness told him that James rolled out of bed: all his tall, handsome and very naked glory… yep, the man slept in the nude. Tony personally wasn’t complaining, not one bit. James clad only in the blue-white glow of their arc reactor night light was a truly magnificent sight…

A patter of bare feet, which the master assassin clearly wanted him to hear, returned the engineer into the real world, and suddenly he wasn’t alone anymore. One of the shadows curled up at his side, blue eyes glowing in the soft light like a cat’s… or a wolf’s.

“… good plan.”

Tony opened the box and stopped, humming thoughtfully.

“What do you think will be better: a raindrop, a star, a simple circle, a triangle…”

“An arrow?” the shadow shifted, now a warm presence on his left, heating him up from shoulder to thigh, chin resting on his shoulder, hot puffs of air tickling his ear. The engineer smiled, exhaling:

“Genius!”

Another puff; this one screaming a playful ‘duh!’ through the bond. That only made his smile widen.

“Join me?”

“No… but I would very much like to ambush you right after, dusha moya (soul of mine).”

“Hah! I’ll hold you to that.”

With that he fished out an appropriately shaped miniaturized arc reactor, kissed the original light of his life on the cheek and scrambled back to the door. Clint was very much surprised, when a lightly glowing arrowhead on a thin metal chain was all but shoved in his hands.

“What’s this? And… is it supposed to glow?”

“This, Barton, is the key to your sound mind. It won’t provide you absolute protection against mind invasions, because every wall can be broken if enough force is applied. The charm starts heating up, read it as a sign that the pressure on the protective shield is about to go into the red zone. If something like this should ever happen, don’t be a hero and run.”

Now the archer looked shell-shocked.

“Will it work?”

“If it didn’t, Loki would have two murder puppets on his hands and believe me I would have done much more damage than you… and Clint?”

“Yeah, I know… he’ll murder me in the most gruesome way possible if I tell anyone, right?”

“Smart man! Now go… and enjoy your free will.”
Friday, his precious girl, closed the doors after that, darkening the blast-proof glass even more.

“I love you.”

“Aw, Boss, you shouldn’t have! What about the Sargent?”

“God, I love him too.”

The darkness behind him chuckled and moved back to bed. The ambush promised to be spectacular….

***

He woke up.

Sleep never lingered with him, his training always thrusting him into the real world all at once, metal fingers bent like claws, ready to strike. The workshop felt… different. Not wrong – the gentle hum of electronics and the unique whirrs and clicks of mechanisms, hidden beneath the concrete floors, all in place – just different.

James opened his eyes and scanned the room. Workbenches, toolboxes, bookcases on the far walls… and yes, his sunshine used actual paperback manuals sometimes, despite hissing at anything non-digital most of the time. U and DUM-E that were dozing in their charging stations. Ironman armors standing sentinel opposite a row of sport cars, some of them being quite old. And a rusty looking old Harley, standing proudly among scattered tools… his little project.

The screen of Tony’s starkphone was glowing. Fortunately, the gadget lay within reach, so he needn’t move much. What surprised him, though, was the name on the screen.

“Miss Friday?”

“Night, Sargent Barnes!” the AI whispered through the tiny speakers. “I think we’re on to something big… a conspiracy!”

“We?”

“Me and Mister Kotov. He went on a reconnaissance mission, ETA till target – three minutes.”

That made him pause, then glance at Tony, who was peacefully slumbering, nose buried in the Soldier’s pillow. The sight made him quirk the corner of his mouth in a slight smile. A shame to wake him, but if Kotov is involved… they must.

Friday took the initiative.

“Boss.”

“Mhm…”

“Boss…”

“Five more minutes…”

“Boss!”

“Holy… Christ, Fri! Cut the volume a notch, will you!”
“Mister Kotov has something to report… I thought it interesting.”

If his sunshine was half-asleep before, he was wide awake now.

“Snowflake?”

The Soldier shook his head in a negative gesture.

“Self-appointed mission. His decision.”

“O-kay…” Tony slowly sat up. “I’m good… and mostly coherent…”

“The video feed please, Miss Friday?”

And just like that they became privy to a ‘secret’ meeting… in the gym, of all places. Sunny hid somewhere in the air vents above, feeling quite comfortable despite lacking an appendage. The spot was also chosen very wisely from a strategic point of view, so the those listening on the other side of the line heard every word.

“Correct me if I’m wrong: you want me to break half a dozen rules of professional ethics to do… what? Spy on them?”

“Well…”

“That’s a dick move, Steve.”

“We just want to be sure that nothing… danger inducing has happened,” Natalia, like the spider that she was, spun her web of words with practiced ease. “Tony means good… most of the time, but he never had a strong grip on restraint. The last time he invented revolutionary technology, he nearly destroyed the planet.”

“Oh… well, this particular invention is certainly not it.”

“What is he doing in there then?”

“Pretty much what he said back at the meeting – psychological trauma treatment,” Sam played the clueless fool rather well. “Or are you asking for something special?”

That innocent question made them pause. Rogers surprised most of them by asking:

“What can you tell us, Sam? Not for the protocol?”

“Not for the protocol… I’d say that you are one lucky dude, Cap.”

“Why do you think so?”

“If the Soldier’s mind wasn’t so scrambled that he couldn’t tell the Past from the Present when we found him in Bucharest, he would have killed you. And the ‘mission’ Hydra gave him, probably, wouldn’t matter much…”

“What? How is that even possible?”

“His soulmate was his top priority for many years. What do you think would have happened if you stood in his way? The man would have plowed through you like a mad rhino!”

“Oh… that makes sense. They seem close.”
“Nope, they are close. No-joking-matter close – Tony is totally committed.”

“Probably the soulmate thing, shackled him down.”

“Smooth, Wanda, real smooth… Has the notion of personal life no meaning to you?”

“Not when it’s spread over every newspaper, magazine and tabloid…”

Tony answered that statement with an indignant snort which could be interpreted only as ‘She’s just jealous.’ He was right… and she was. But the world had no right to judge, much less to own Tony now, because Tony was his… till the Soldier’s last breath.

“Think about it this way,” Barton said. “While the media stalk him, they aren’t stalking any of us. Besides, what are we going to do with our Winter Soldier problem? Remember what Strange said: he’s an imposter in Barnes’s body!”

“Strange didn’t say that…”

“Sounded like that to me.”

“He said there was another soul, a Hydra soul, within Bucky’s soul… and it’s keeping Bucky down. How do you get rid of a soul?”

How indeed… James was curious too. Tony beside him went alarmingly still, all his attention on the video feed.

Wanda, as the resident magic user, tried to answer to the best of her abilities. The Soldier knew she visited the Sanctum: to learn about her powers, to learn how to control them, to find where the boundaries lie. Doctor Strange turned out to be an excellent mentor and he didn’t sugarcoat anything.

“We have no working hypothesis about how Hydra scientists achieved such a transition. They were in possession of the Tesseract for many years, before you took the cube. No one knows for sure what other experiments were conducted…”

“Wanda, who’s side are you on?”

“Our, of course, but… the cracks on his spirit form – we assumed they appeared because that other soul was breaking the original one. What if we made a mistake and the Soldier’s spirit is doing the exact opposite and holding what is left of Sargent Barnes’s soul together?”

“Why would he do that?”

Natalia made an educated guess, which wasn’t far from the truth.

“He needs him, which is strange. The Soldier usually doesn’t need anyone to perform missions.”

Sam sighed.

“Nat… people change. And we should really stop with this plotting business – it’s not doing us any good. Stop hounding the guy! If you are really interested in the whole ‘other soul’ drama, why don’t you find out who it belonged to in the first place? It’ll give you something to do…”

Sunny cut down the feed and silently crawled away. In the workshop silence reigned.

“You know,” Tony sounded thoughtful. “She does have a point… Who are you, soldier-boy?”
“I don’t remember.”

***

They let sleeping dogs lie… for now.

***

“Let’s do something boring today,” said his sunshine, and that is when the Soldier knew – Tony and the conversation from last night… he forgot nothing. Probably, he was already doing some digging, because Friday was certainly good, but she had nothing on her creator.

He nodded his agreement.

“Boring is good.”

“Should I prepare to be shocked in one way or another?”


The glasses were on, B.A.R.F. came alive forming memories into pixels around them, Sam sipping his tea in his corner, Sunny drinking a sport drink with a detached air about him…

Comfort? Yes.

James closed his eyes. Comfort was unnecessary. Boring… he wanted to feel bored…

A thought occurred seemingly out of nowhere – he hated fishing the most.

B.A.R.F. answered to his idle thoughts by sending them to a place neither Tony, nor Sam recognized. It was a river bank, but unlike any river bank they’ve ever seen. A small gloomy looking village was dwarfed by a massive forest covered cliff. The rising sun painted the rocks in shades of warm yellows and light browns, making them shine in a unique golden hue, patches of yellowish green from pine trees only adding to the picture. Pictured against grey cloudy skies with rare patches of blue… a spectacular sight!

A boy, early teens maybe, marched along a wide trail, a simple fishing rod on one shoulder, a woven basket hanging off the other. Dark hair peeked in awkward angles from under an oversized cap. The shirt he was wearing felt like it was meant for someone bigger, while the pants he had on looked like he grew out of them some time ago, showing off bare feet, ankles and scared shins. Looked like dog bites, but Tony wasn’t sure. The boy was also wearing a nasty scowl; like he would prefer to be anywhere, except on this trail, but… he walked on regardless.

“James?” his sunshine couldn’t help whispering.

“Нет (No),” the Soldier found himself whispering as well. “Не Джеймс (Not James).”

If Tony was quiet before, now he went utterly, mouse under the broom, still. The boy in the simulation in the meantime found a fishing spot somewhere upstream, made himself comfortable on one of the flat rocks lying here and there and grumbling unraveled his fishing rod…

It went on for hours. The basket slowly filled with fish and even Tony could tell that the boy was having a bad day. If this was the only food he would be bringing home, their dinner wouldn’t be much of a dinner at all…

“Father hunted down a deer, so we had our meals set for a few days…” the Soldier’s voice sounded
strange even to his own ears, suspiciously like longing. “Mother also made preserves… for winter months. Fishing, though… even chopping wood was more fun.”

“Those houses look old…”

“They are… but we moved here, from a bigger city. Father was assigned a job… to protect workers from wild animals. They felled timber.”

“So, he was a hunter?”

“What he did… hard to describe… like a park ranger?”

“Oh.”

“Taught me many things, in case I got lost. I never did.”

“… just a bit longer?”

“Mm.”

They watched the kid fish.

Chapter End Notes

The village from the Soldier's memories (a real existing village called Shamanka on the river Irkut, well known for its cliffs)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a8/%D0%92%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B5.jpg/1024px-%D0%92%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B5.jpg
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Giant sea monsters, secret bases...
Cryogenic chambers in places where the sun doesn't shine.
And magic... why it always has to be magic?

Chapter Notes

What was left of the Canon has officially left the building... but you probably guessed that) but the Avengers fighting Thanos is still the endgame)

James B. speaks Russian, learned in prison, so when he is speaking Russian it looks this way - "Vot tak (Like so)."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After what happened in the B.A.R.F.-room (BARF-chamber?.. mental workshop!), Tony was struck with a strong feeling of déjà vu. Then he saw Cap in the hallway, and it clicked…

Barnes was born in 1917. His soulmate must have also been born in that time period... only somewhere else. Probably, Russia… torn apart by revolution, civil war and foreign intervention. Tony also read about famine, oppression and labor camps you most likely won’t ever come back from. They were building a new country on the ruins of the old one… the upcoming Great War caught them by total surprise.

“People change, landscapes don’t… Fri, let’s find us a village!”

“Aye-aye, Boss!”

When the Avengers alarm rocked the Compound, they managed to narrow it down to one region, a place near the mountains of Altai and the great Baikal lake. His Soldier said they moved from a bigger city which could have been Irkutsk, so that village had to be somewhere in the vicinity…

It was highly unlikely, thought the engineer, while dressing up for combat, they’ll find a name, not after almost a century. And his soulmate didn’t give the impression of a man who’d sit in the safety of his home while enemies stormed his homeland’s doorstep. It wasn’t a question of ideology anymore…

The comm clicked twice, indicating a call on a private channel… not one-on-one type of private, but private. Tony couldn’t hold in a slight giggle: of course, James knew that Tony knew. Well, he didn’t tell him to stop, so…

“Was your search successful?” the Soldier seemed genuinely curious.

“I found the cliffs. The rest is just me poking at the sky…”
“What I have learned about your assumptions so far is that they are usually very accurate, but I doubt records of any kind survived in that village…”

“Not even the ones on paper?”

“Not even those.”

“Damn…”

“You think like a civilian, which is not bad: you may see something we, soldiers, lose track of. But for this - military records would give you more insight. There were many volunteers from every corner of the country, when the announcement about the enemy at our gates came over the radio… some even added extra years only to have the possibility to fight, to defend their homeland.”

“You too?”

A quiet laugh was his answer, safe from public scrutiny behind the mask.

“I didn’t have to… was old enough already. Feels strange to remember such things, Antosha…”

“Good strange or bad strange?”

“Good, I think.”

“Then we have no reason to worry about this… today. Let’s worry about the giant squid near the coast of Florida instead… Have you seen the size of that thing? No way it’s natural!”

“Nothing trained to hunt aircraft carrier ships is natural…”

“My point exactly! Meet you at the jet?”

“Affirmative.”

He and Sunny went for a run and hour earlier, that’s why Tony risked, being sneaky with his search/research attempt. Upon hearing the alarm the Soldier went straight to the armory, while Senya, like a proper little recovering patient (not), made his way to the gym… only to end up in front of a flat screen in one of the unused living rooms of the East wing.

The ‘hidden ace’ role didn’t bother him much - it was part of his assassin training after all. What bothered Tony at times was how easily the former Winter Soldier Jr. managed to live his quiet life around a base full with super-heroes… and remain unnoticed by everyone, except Sam. He spent here more nights than at the VA center, dozing on the some living room couch like a big ginger feline. Would have been adorable, if the engineer hadn’t witnessed his soulmate’s protégé disassemble (more like dismember…) a fresh chicken with a combat knife. Professional chefs had nothing on the guy! May have been the scariest thing he ever saw in his life and he’d seen some weird shit. James just smirked, the bastard, and shooed him to wash the meaty bits…

They made a truly wicked sauce to go with the very plain spaghetti that evening. Tony was just impressed he hadn’t burned water…

“Shouldn’t we consult with an oceanology expert?” asked Clint, when they were already in the quinjet, halfway to the beaches of Florida. “It’s my first giant squid, so I don’t know the drill yet.”

“Well,” Steve looked baffled. “I did call Director Fury, requesting more information. He said they are looking for somebody, but until then we are on our own.”
Tony sat there unimpressed, thankful for the helmet that covered his face. James was unimpressed too, his feelings tickling him with warm fingers through the bond. What he said, though, was a very profound description of their situation:

“Дурдом (What a madhouse)…”

Nat narrowed her eyes at him from her seat on the other end of the jet. The Soldier stared back, while quirking a questioning eyebrow. If she were still a little girl, she would have turned away fuming.

“If it is information you need, Captain, my Captain, I can provide plenty,” Tony Stark wouldn’t be Tony Stark if he didn’t show off a bit. “While that freak Musk busied himself launching cars into space, Stark Industries launched an array of new satellites recently as a part of the International Anti-Cataclysm Program. Friday is accessing the one hovering over Florida as we speak, and we’ll have coordinates, visuals, scans, even heat signatures of the creature in about three minutes…”

The figurative clanging of falling jaws against the metal flor panels was very distinctive. Tony scowled.

“What? I’m a billionaire!”

“When…?! There wasn’t anything in the news about this!”

“Those vultures are more interested in the type of underwear I wear than revolutionizing space travel…”

“And what underwear do you wear?”

“Winter Soldier themed boxers, but that’s beside the point.”

Now James was quirking an eyebrow at him, looking both amused and leery, like he wouldn’t be opposed to the idea of peeling him out of his armor and under-suit and sating his curiosity. The bond flared hot with spicy affection… and Tony preened, once again happy he designed the suit the way he did.

“I’ll show you later, Tasty Freeze…”

“Ловлю на слове (I’ll take you up on that).”

Friday honest to God giggled like the teenage girl she pretended to be, but as soon as the first data from the sight appeared on the holographic screens the AI turned serious.

“Boss, I took the liberty and contacted Colonel Rhodes and our liaison in the US Navy, because we might need assistance and a base of operations closer to the source.”

“Just how big is that thing that it got you so worried?”

“I used the Chitauri Leviathan to estimate the size. The animal’s main body is five times that, the length of the tentacles is 2.5 times its body length. I am also registering strange emanations from some parts within the main body that, after a profound data analysis, lead me to the conclusion that they are of mechanical nature.”

“A cyborg… who would’ve thought…”

“That is not all, Boss. I have also registered a highly encrypted radio signal on a similarly encrypted frequency: from the creature to a location somewhere on the South pole.”
“O-kay… so it’s a squid with a backseat driver… who is running the show from an icy bunker in the Antarctic,” Tony paused, before shrugging. “Could have been worse…”

“Debatable, but… yeah,” Cap took a deep breath and focused. “Listen up, people! Here’s the plan…”

In the end, after processing what the good Captain was about to make them do, the engineer was feeling rather grim. They would be separated, and his Soldier would be stuck with Nat and Clint, who reeked of SHIELD and didn’t even try to hide it, on the South Pole of all places, a literal no man’s land with nothing but snow and penguins for miles.

“If they return without you, I’ll make them wish they didn’t return at all…” their private channel and their masks served them well once again.

“I’m hard to kill, dusha moya (soul of mine).”

“What if they use the Words on you?”

“They think the triggers make me obedient. In truth, the conditioning just makes me follow orders. From my Handler, specifically, and for a long time my only Handler were you…”

“Oh…” Tony never knew. “When did that happen?”

“Around the year 1970…”

“Huh.”

“But it was 1980, when I felt it in my bones…”

For a second the billionaire felt puzzled, because… what life-changing exactly happened in 1980? Then it once again clicked… he sleep traveled to his soulmate the first time! And woke up in the middle of the night with tear streaked cheeks, scream filled ears and terrified eyes.

The line separating acceptance and abandonment was indeed very thin…

When most normal children go to their parents for advice, young Tony went to Jarvis. The old butler, may his soul rest in heaven, took one look at him that night and understood everything. Without another word, he led the boy to the kitchens, where two mugs of hot chocolate were prepared. The man didn’t pry, waiting, letting his young charge move at his own pace… Tony remembered feeling grateful for that. He asked what does ‘ne smotri’ mean, tongue stumbling over unfamiliar words. If Jarvis was surprised, he masked it well. He knew a bit of Russian, mostly through his late wife Anna, who was from Hungary, so he answered that it meant ‘don’t look’… and Tony’s eyes went wide. He was a bit young to experience revelations, but it sure felt like one, especially to the young Stark.

His soulmate was trying to protect him. He couldn’t protect himself, but he was trying to shield him…

That night Tony Stark made a decision. He was scared, but Stark men were made of iron, so he bit the bullet and went back to sleep wishing Jarvis a good evening. ‘Best of luck, young Sir’ in distinctive British accompanied him on the way back to the bedroom. Yep, he was going to need that too…

Tony remembered falling asleep, holding onto the bond with shaky ethereal fingers and appearing in a dark cell. Bare concrete walls, bare concrete floors and a small bared window overhead. He looked
around, expecting to see a cot or at least a mattress… and found none. His soulmate lay in the middle of it all, a still half naked form, lying on the side, bleeding sluggishly from the place where the metal shoulder of his left arm met flesh. The only indication that he was alive was the slow rise and fall of his back…

Words meant nothing here, so he’ll have to let his actions speak for him. The boy in his memories took a deep fortifying breath, and crept forward, not forgetting to make some noise to let the imprisoned man know he isn’t alone. Long dark hair obscured the view of his face, so Tony had no idea if it worked… either way, not important, because he was already crawling under that metal arm to curl up against the man’s chest, fingers on the bond… in the bond, concentrating on happy thoughts to channel the warmth from them through…

The man shifted, curling around him in return… protecting him again. Also there was a whisper, hoarse from continuous screaming and disuse, uttering a word Tony didn’t know.

Спасибо (Thank you)

But the bond flickered back with gratitude, so he guessed the meaning anyway…

Back in the present, Tony Stark once again felt like going to Jarvis for advice, because he was standing in front of a different line once again. He had enough anger at the world pent up inside it would make Ultron seem about as dangerous as a cupcake vendor.

“Friday is coming with you, and Sunny will be on standby, if Fri suddenly goes offline. Fucking squid…”

The Soldier smiled, albeit a bit sadly. The South Pole mission was not ideal, not by a long shot, but he’d survived worse. Anything could happen in the frozen wastes… and ten trigger words can certainly be a mouthful, when faced with death one on one.

That is if SHIELD hadn’t staged this ordeal in the first place…

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The flight to the enemy base which turned out to be hidden under an old abandoned soviet research station ‘Vostok’ was uneventful. The Soldier spent his time, checking out the winter gear his sunshine provided them with. The spies did the same, taking turns on watching him.

“What do you think will be there?” it was Barton’s first arctic mission. “Some mad scientist?”

“Depends who the base belongs to,” Natalia as usual had answers for every question; she always did her homework well.

“Meaning?”

“If it’s Hydra, I wouldn’t count on that.”

“Hydra?! Here?!”

“Well, they needed to hide somewhere all these years,” the Widow made a show of loading her pistol. “Why not here? Remote, natural camouflage, secluded…”

“Cold as shit…”

“That too.”
The archer addressed the Soldier next. Expecting to hear something different?

“And what do you think?”

That earned him a raised eyebrow. Clint made an exaggerated hand gesture, adding:

“About all this.”

“Contrary to popular belief I do not know all the bases Hydra utilized by heart…”

“Why I do not seem convinced?”

“I do not know. May be because this is not a base, but a cold storage facility?”

The agents shared a look.

“Cryo-tubes?”

“Yes. That monster our comrades are fighting must have been one of the test subjects, which survived the troubled times…”

“Apart from the squid what else could be there?”

“Anything they had no need of anymore, but what was too valuable to throw away or destroy. I would suggest for you to be ready for events unexpected.”

“O-kay… helpful you were not.”

The Soldier just shrugged. If they were as good as they were portrayed, they would manage. The comm unit in his right ear gave a soft ding, signaling that Friday for whatever reason needed his attention. With a barely noticeable turn of the head he turned the signature mask covering the bottom half of his face into a muzzle, effectively silencing his voice to the world.

“Yes, Miss Friday?”

“Aren’t you scared, Sargent Barnes?”

Ah, Tony’s clever girl… caught onto things faster than anyone, her father including…

“Can I trust you to guide James to safety? He would be disoriented when he wakes up.”

“What about Boss? He would be devastated…”

“All shall return to its intended place…”

“I notified Mister Kotov. He is on his way,” there was steely resolve in the AI’s voice. “We are bringing you back… all of you.”

Such devotion… was he worth all this? From their point of view, without a doubt.

“Look after my sunshine, please, Miss Friday. It might take some time for me to wake up again.”

“… consider it done… you are a Sargent, right?”

“Прости, малышка (Sorry, darling girl). Out of the two of us, James is the more decorated one.”

“Ha!”
“But I still shoot better.”

That seemed to calm her down a bit, although friendly banter wasn’t his strong side. When they reached ‘Vostok’, she was all business, whispering useful information in his ear. Black Widow and Hawkeye were also in the loop, albeit received only the essential minimum. Like his sunshine would say, no love lost here…

The villain did not see them coming, but put up a fight nevertheless, using one of the Tesseract-based weapon prototypes he must have found here. They managed to subdue him, but only after the Soldier shot him through both kneecaps. Clint’s bow was close to useless in local subzero temperatures, and Natalia emerged from the fight with a concussion and several cracked ribs.

“Let’s go look around.”

A logical suggestion. The Soldier nodded his agreement, so they left the guarding to the Widow. The facility was spacious, and Hydra made good use of their invention of cryogenic technology, freezing up literally everything, human-animal hybrids being a favorite.

“Werewolves, really?”

“Mhm, fought one of them once.”

“… you’re alive, so I assume you won?”

“He was a worthy opponent. I made it quick.”

They walked some more, reaching a section dedicated to cybernetic technology. Center stage stood a massive tank…empty. There was also a much smaller tank way in the back, old, iced over, but still beaming with green lights on control panels. The small observation window on the top half was also covered by a thick lair of ice…

Clint cursed, leaning in, trying to see past the century old icing, obscuring the view of the tiny plaque below. The Soldier watched, paying the struggle between nature and man little mind. Almost a century crawled by, yet the pull was still there, still strong… chains, flaying loose mere moments ago, were strained past their breaking limits…

Two souls in one body was something never meant to exist, unnatural in its nature, so now this ‘flaw’ would finally be corrected.

“Miss Friday?” words were hard, already slipping; burning his throat just like the bond, screaming with pain, worry and panic, was burning his mind. “Remember.”

After that all lights went out.

***

Tony was racing against the clock. The right sleeve of his flight suit was soaked through, and the blood just kept pouring, painting the fingers of his right hand an ominous red. The bond linking him to James felt like a rough wound: bringing agony, pulsing and almost alive… and this scared him the most.

What if it brock? What if his light would be lost forever?

Ironman, no more than a red and gold streak between heaven and earth, was giving it his all to not let that happen.
Something must have transpired in that bunker, albeit not what they were preparing for. Friday was honest to God crying his ear off, chanting over and over that his Soldier was gone, but how could he be gone when he was right here, burning his arm off?!

They beat the squid epic-battle style with lots of fireworks and flashy moves. For a cyborg it was quite stupid. Then Nat reported from the South Pole that they apprehended the bastard responsible… and minutes later Tony all but doubled over cursing up a storm, experiencing the whole specter of emotions following one’s soul being torn out and torn in two.

Rhodey was at his side in seconds.

“Tony? What’s going on? Are you alright?”

“James… I’m fine, Rhodey-bear… James is hurting somewhat severe… I have to go… right now… right now!”

“Okay… go! I’ll cover for you…”

And he needn’t be told twice, blasting from the top deck of the aircraft carrier they were stationed at in a flurry of movement and sparks.

Tony reached the ‘Vostok’ base in record time, ignored the front entrance and blasted his way through ice and rock straight to the source. What he found there, startled the hell out of him…

Somehow Sunny got here before he did, and now was standing between the frozen-in cryogenic chamber and Nat and Clint with all the seriousness of a suicide-bomber explosive filled vest plus detonator included. The Junior Winter Soldier was clad in the combat armor Tony designed especially for him (similar to James’s, but with more flame to it) and rocking the prototype Mark 4 prosthetic arm (non-invasive, nanobot powered neurologic connections, leather harness to hold it). The bottom half of his face was hidden behind a black bandana sprinkled with a smiley face pattern. Kinky… if you don’t look where the spy-twins were looking. The level of cold those brilliant greens held made Antarctica seem a bit warmer.

James wasn’t at his side, like usual… he, curled up in a trembling panicky ball, sat at his feet… flinched away from the loud bang Ironman made his grand entrance with, hand darting for the knife on some deep engraved instinct…

The mark on his wrist flared with anger bordering on fury, and James stilled, peaking at him through his bangs, doing a double take…

Grey. His eyes were grey. That was the first hint. The visor zoomed in on his left shoulder, looking, searching, counting the lovingly crafted metal plates… ‘Barnes?’ was fading away… or changing hosts? He had to be sure…

“Barnes?”

“Sorry, doll,” a shaky Brooklyn drawl was his answer. “Your fella is a bit indisposed at the moment…”

“… where is he?”

“In there, I reckon’… otherwise this crazy Russian punk wouldn’t be guarding it this… fiercely.”

“His name’s Sunny.”
“… must be the hair.”

Tony couldn’t hold in a broken giggle.

“Nah, he’s a peach… anyway, time to choose, Barnes,” repulsors roared to life, tiny missile hatches opening up… he may have left the brunt of his ammo with the squid on the bottom of the Caribbean, but for these two he still had plenty; all the agents had to do is blink the wrong way. “Are you with me or with them?”

Alas, the moment of truth! If James looked panicked before, now the utter shock of the situation snapped him out of it. He eyed Tony, shot a sidelong glance at Kotov… then with a much more somber expression assessed Nat, who was hurriedly mumbling her report into the comm, and Clint, who was trying to keep it professional and hold onto his composure; they had nothing to fight him with. He must have seen something that didn’t agree with him, because he said:

“I haven’t been up to date with the world exactly…”

Tony gave him a mental thumbs up – smart man! Rogers, for instance, jumped into the fray almost the same moment he was revived.

“Don’t you have a bad guy to bag? Before he freezes to death?”

“We will be speaking about this again.” Nat thought she sounded intimidating… not. “In front of the Accords Council, no doubt.”

“Of course, we will. Waging another ‘Civil War’ against me is not in your best interests, I’m sure.”

When they left (for good, Friday tracked their quinjet), the fight left him… or maybe the adrenalin high just wore off? Only the omnipresent ache in the soul bond kept him from spiraling into grief…

What the fuck happened here?!

He said as much.

“What the fuck happened here?”

Barnes looked around before pointing at the dead frozen terminal several steps away.

“If you power that up… somehow, you’ll get it. Maybe better than those people from SSR… your fella seems to think you very smart.”

Tony stared. SSR?

“… how much do you remember, Barnes? Wait, hold it… let me rephrase… when do your memories stop?”

James… or is it Bucky now? … turned pensive. He was so into it, that he totally missed the scrutinizing once over Kotov was giving him. Knowing him, it was most likely a threat assessment.

“I don’t forget much, you see… never did. All the important bits are still there - the drafting, the War, the prison camp, Zola – clear as day. Remember Steve saving us too, all pumped up and a foot taller. Things turn fuzzy from there… the next thing I remember, I’m in a prison cell in soviet Russia missing an arm. That can’t be good, right?”

“Nope, it really isn’t.”
“I’ve spent there several years… I think. After that: torture, interrogations, conditioning… the Chair. Only pieces from then on…” James paused. “Your fella wanted this as much as I did…”

“I know. So you knew him? Personally?”

“Wish I could help, but I really only saw him once… when they were wheeling me in, they were wheeling him out. The scariest eyes I’ve ever seen…”

Tony felt like he was losing his mind, so the engineer shut his eyes, counted to ten and back and… went to work.

“Right. Time is something we don’t have an abundance of. Once Cap finds out you’re you, Barnes, he’ll come running. We need to leave this cozy place by then… Sunny, where’d you get the bomb? Looks neat!”

“Сам собрал (Made it myself). Красавица, не правда ли? (Isn’t she a beauty?)”

“Give me five! Just be careful with the detonator, yeah?”

Sunny huffed, radiating mischief, and showed him the wiring. The button of doom wasn’t connected to the dynamite sticks and C4 bricks… at all.

“Man, you’re one twisted cookie!” Tony felt like a father whose kid just graduated college with all honors imaginable. Sunny preened.

“Friday, scan anything and everything. Pay special attention to the cryo-chamber: what powers it, where the generators are, is the chamber movable at all. Second problem – data. Electronic documents are not Hydra’s style, so you two scout the facility, gather any scrap of paper you find and load it into the jet. We’ll sort them out later. I’m going to fix the terminal.”

With mission parameters set, the two Soldiers fell into an easy rhythm. Friday was unusually silent, throwing all her processing power into her current task, leaving just a few percent to cover the surveillance.

Tony rubbed some warmth into his fingers and dived under the table, elbow deep in century old technology… work, wires and cables, familiar territory. He started rambling soon after.

“Were you going to tell me, Snowflake? Guess if you knew, you would’ve… To think they tore your soul out of your body, just to prove a point, but you know, sugarplum, this changes nothing. Feel a bit awkward talking to Barnes, though, since I kind of slept with him, multiple times, but not…”

The mark, still a bundle of pain, but also he swore he heard laughter somewhere in there. His Snowflake would understand.

“Now you got me all wondering what you look like… curious, is all… bet you’re beautiful, either way… what did James mean, though? With the eyes… wonder about that too…”

The terminal wasn’t dead, disconnected at most. Tony reconnected the wires and power-cables and… yes.

“Blood for the Blood God, brother;” the engineer got his hands on the archaic looking keyboard. “Let’s find us some skulls…”

He didn’t make much sense. He didn’t want to make any sense.
Hydra were certainly pioneers in the field of biological experimentation and cybernetics... how they achieved such heights, though, was the type of question polite people don’t ask. Fri translated, Tony read. Zola was the leading scientist in most of those projects... along with Erskin (surprise!). Erskine fled to the States soon after, taking their newest discovery, the super-soldier serum formula, with him. Zola had to start from scratch... Hydra was very generous with funding, protection and test subjects. They got the whole Nazi government at their back and call, after all...

“Project ‘Alpha’, huh? Top-dog...” then Tony read about the project being a testing ground for the Winter Soldier Program, and his blood ran cold.

Everything Barnes went through his Soldier went through twice. When they installed the metal arm on Barnes, the procedure had been practiced and practiced and practiced on Subject Alpha, who couldn’t seem to die thanks to the chemicals they pumped him with. And when Barnes didn’t break, Subject Alpha, a mere husk of a man by then, was stripped of the last thing he possessed – his undying soul. Why? To ensure obedience.

How did Strange put it? Monstrous, yet clever...

“Who are you, alpha-wolf? What’s your name?”

But all the Files gave him were dry facts. Height (187 centimeters... six foot three?), weight, blue eyes, dark hair... arm injury... *left arm* injury. Red Army soldier... found with a sniper rifle... forty confirmed kills. Six escape attempts from six different Nazi-governed prison camps, until Hydra got their hands on him... and the only place left for him to escape to was the sanctuary of his own mind.

Pain and sadness from the bond mixed with his sadness and pain.

“Doesn’t matter... I’m yours, you’re mine. Till the end...”

“Boss, scanning complete, the cryo-champer is indeed transportable, but the ice must be cleaned off with extreme caution. The wirings are old and any rash movement may cause a system failure.”

“Roger that... download these for me, will you, baby-girl?”

“Done and done.”

“Let’s look into the icing problem... causing trouble all over again...”

Two hours later two super-soldiers found him on his knees, cooing at the outdated control panels as if they could understand him...

James turned to Sunny for answers. The redhead just shook his head with a small smile, bandana hanging lose around his neck.

“Техника его любит (Computers love him). Даже старая (Even the old ones).”

“Znachit, eto normal’no? (So this is normal?)”

“Ты еще не видел, как он с оружием разговаривает (You should see how he talks to the guns). Для человека, который отказался производить оружие крупнейшей компанией по производству оружия, он слишком его любит (For a man who refused to build weapons while being head of the world’s biggest weapon manufacturing company, he loves them too much).”

“A kto on? (Who is he?)”
James paled, but proved to be a tough cookie and manned up.

"Klassnaya u nego bronya (He has a cool armor)."

"Мне тоже нравится (I like it too)."

***

Sunny and James cozied themselves in the cockpit. Yep, 'cozied' was what they were, after James asked another stupid question along the lines of “А ты кто? (And you are?)” and Senya shot an annoyed “Кот в пальто! (Cat in a coat!)” his way… simultaneously, pinging all the right boxes soulmate wise.

Bucky may have left to war with no first words of his own and Sunny’s were blown off with his arm, but fate found a way.

… his own mark changed as well. ‘Нет (No)’ was washed away, liberating space for a new set: longer, two rows, Cyrillic letters.

Привет, солнышко (Hi, sunshine)

He also had a hunch about what his soulmate’s half would be…

A bark of laughter from the cabin was a welcome distraction. Barnes had a good voice, infectious bordering on charming, if a little cracked… you don’t survive what he had and don’t sound a little cracked. Russian suited him too, but Tony could hear the difference between a foreigner, who learned the language to perfection, and a Native speaker. His Soldier had a subtle lilt to his speech, most likely thanks to some regional dialect…

Speaking of regions… he still hadn’t read those lists of military recruits. Twenty thousand people from Irkutsk alone… and his light was among them. Well, good thing he knew how to code a state of the art search engine from nothing!

“Wish me luck, Tasty Freeze! Daddy is coming to town…”

Amusement tinted with a drop of exasperation. Yeah, his mate was game. The bond stopped hurting too… Best. Sign. Ever.

Step one: rule out all the lucky ones who managed to return alive.

Step two: rule out all those who found their end on the battlefield.

Step three: investigate those missing. All in all, about a hundred. They decided to split the load, as his light used to say, ‘po-bratski’ which in this case meant 50/50.

After a hour, only three remained. One of them had brown eyes, the other belonged to a different ethnical group, which left them with one name…


The bond blossomed with gratitude and love. Tony hid a warm smile.

“Found you...”
Yes, you did.

Chapter End Notes

You'll be surprised of the amount of digging you must do for a story)) I liked it, though)
almost like traveling, but not ;)
The idea of Project Alpha came to me while sorting through my WS picture stash:
installing a metal arm is one hell of an operation! They most likely practiced on
somebody, but we don't see many three legged metal pawed animals running around.
Same goes for the brainwashing.

Soul transfer using the Tesseract - the Stone can open portals to transport objects from
one end of the universe to the other, so transporting a soul from one body to another
should be within its capabilities, albeit requires much more delicate work.

I'm also a fan of happy endings, so James B. + Sunny = <3
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The fated meeting and unexpected reveals...

Chapter Notes

We made it)

The image of Yakov was based on the following art (not mine, all the credit belongs to their creators)
1) Yakov's tattoos - https://i.pinimg.com/564x/bd/eb/5d/bdeb5d9859ac0ac4abd890d09e72d93f.jpg
2) What he looks like - https://i.pinimg.com/564x/ab/67/d2/ab67d2fa967be8534f5a43f1a536e1c6.jpg

Nat must have been very explicit in her reports and profiling, because as soon as they reached American airspace Tony’s mobile nearly exploded from all the incoming calls it was subjected to. The conference call software he installed in there was put to the ultimate test the next following days…

The Committee chewed him out on a) harboring a potential international criminal; b) hiding potentially invaluable information; c) putting his teammates at risk (the monster of the week was already fish food by the time Ironman darted out of there; strange, that it went unnoticed)... there was even an option d) going against direct orders (which he did not remember hearing)! Read in a bit, and you might think only his money (and the Stark Industries lawyer team) was keeping Tony Stark roaming free under the blue skies and out of the Raft.

A modicum of support came from an unexpected source – the Veteran Association of the Russian Federation, which, in turn, was heavily supported by the Afghanistan Campaign Veterans Association, Chechnya Campaign Veterans Association, Special Forces Veterans Association, along with a bunch of other organizations, functioning in the field, including war historians and archeologists and behind them… loomed the ominous shadow of the Russian Ministry of Defense. That cooled down some hot heads, especially after the deceptively polite statement from Russia’s UN delegation representative hinting that their grandfathers already reached Berlin once and it’s only polite to respect the tradition…

Tony was baffled… and humbled too. For such a big country, Russia was surprisingly… unknown, aside from import/export lists. A continent posing for a country, as the popular joke went. He never thought they’d back him up, though, when he sent them the information on the MIA Red Army soldiers he and Friday uncovered while searching for his Soldier’s identity. It was a right thing to do. These people may be dead, but they had wives, children and relatives who never had the opportunity to mourn and bury their loved ones properly. The answer came a few hours later, although not in a form Tony had expected. You don’t find a list of unfamiliar names in your mailbox every day, accompanied by a small note. Turned out, some of the soldiers his light served with were still alive,
as well as his youngest brother, who still lived in Irkutsk. So if Yakov wanted to visit them in the future, he could.

Another issue was the Committee trying to bring Sunny in for questioning. Sam didn’t let them, fighting for his patients tooth and nail. Yep, there were two of them now: Soldier Jr. and Barnes, who also signed up for B.A.R.F. – his sunshine started the process, now it was up to J.B. to finish it. Fri was still looking for a perfect nickname for the man - Steve’s insistence on calling him ‘Bucky’ was vetoed on the spot by the AI, therefore ignored.

Tony told them to get lost (in a much more polite manner, of course) or schedule a meeting, because Pepper may be the CEO, but the R&D department was still on him and there actually were board meetings he couldn’t weasel out of.

He had an antique cryo-capsule to fix on top of that.

Rhodey was with him every step of the way. The image of the Iron Colonel stuck to him as if super-glued, but he was an engineer… specialized in aircrafts, but… he assisted his best friend in suit repairs plenty of times and knew his way around the tools.

“Are you going to talk about it? I don’t need the details; the cliff-notes version is just fine with me.”

“Well, Rhodey-bear, this is going to absolutely shock you, but the Winter Soldier is the only man I’m willing to marry: church, rings, white doves… the whole shebang.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, Tones…”

“Steve Rogers makes me sick?”

“Guessed that too.”

“Man, you drive a hard bargain…” Tony tried to get rid of the rising exhaustion by rubbing his temples; didn’t work… only his Soldier’s touch seemed to work. “You know about the soul thing, right? You were present, when Strange dropped that particular bombshell. Well, my soulmate is in this metal coffin now… was in there all this time and would have been in there still if not for this faulty coincidence of events. When we open this tin can, what would we find? You’ve never read those reports, Rhodey. Hell entered his life long before Hydra did.”

“Tell me.”

“I’ve never been the one interested in history. Not after I grew out of Dad’s ‘Captain America’ obsession, but Snowflake got me thinking about that time again. The US joined the European front… when? In 1944? By then, Yakov was in the camps for three years already: mined cowl for Nazi factories, worked at a secret chemical plant where no one gave the prisoners gas masks, because why bother, starved to death in a blood collecting facility in eastern Germany… Why wouldn’t Captain America go and save those people too? Azzano wasn’t that far from that place, I checked…”

“Maybe he didn’t know,” but there was a peculiar tilt in Rhodey’s voice that told the engineer his platypus was asking himself the same question.

“Bullshit… I’ve seen photos of that place – it's fucking huge! Three football fields worth of territory huge!”

“…you know he went after Barnes against all orders, right?”
“You don’t say! So it’s a habit, then?”

“Ha, seems so…”

“Hand me that tester will you?”

“Sure.”

Tools exchanged hands. Tony compared the schematics Fri projected for them with what was in front of his eyes, before diving into the circuitry with a soldering-iron.

“Dad would’ve had kittens.”

“About?”

“Me and Snowflake. Well, he wasn’t exactly ecstatic to begin with, when the mark appeared, and the issue of it not being in English always set him off…”

“Ever find out why?”

Tony smirked.

“Dad wanted to sell me off into an arranged marriage once I turned eighteen.”

Colonel almost dropped the wrench he was holding.

“…?!?”

“One of his business partners had a mark-less daughter, so… I cost him a contract.”

“Well, that just sucks…”

“Snowflake showed me the drawer where the documents were kept, when I visited the mansion on summer holidays my first year of boarding school and taught me how to pick the lock using a couple of hair pins.”

“Did he teach you how to hotwire cars too?”

“Nope, that one I learned all on my lonesome…”

Something within the infernal contraption gave an almost microwave like ping, and the capsule started slowly, almost unwillingly leaking steam.

“Boss, the reviving sequence has begun… should I alert the med bay?”

“How long will it take?”

“Five hours.”

Tony cursed in Italian. Friday sounded sheepish:

“It’s old, Boss.”

“Is there a faster option?”

“The capsule wasn’t meant to be opened… at all.”
“… I’ll go get a blanket. You crashing with me, Sour Patch?”

Rhodey sighed, a bit resigned, albeit not at him. Avengers business must be getting to him.

“Only for about an hour or two, because I have a meeting at one where we’ll be discussing new recruits with Ross and Fury.”

“Why the long face? You endured those fine before.”

“Rogers is trying to push Barnes into joining the Avengers. He signed the Accords already, as himself this time, along with that Russian dude. They’re together everywhere, almost joined at the hip… looks creepy as shit!”

“Not my secret to disclose, but you should probably know – J.B. and Sunny are bonded.”

The Colonel nearly dropped that wrench again, eyes wide, looking incredulous.

“When did that happen!”

“Officially, on the flight back from the South Pole. Unofficially, something must have pinged when J.B. still resembled a crossword-puzzle and Sunny served as Hydra’s murder doll. Snowflake noticed. That man notices everything…”

“Just how long was his ‘long game’ going on then, Tones? Sometimes, when I stop and think about it, the things he accomplished singlehandedly just seem unreal.”

“Well…”

“Barnes doesn’t want to. I kind of understand where he’s coming from: he only just got his mind back, found his mate and simply wants to figure things out.”

“Feel human again…”

“Yes, that.”

“You should keep an eye on Senya then. That cat may look like he’s dozing, but the reality is not rainbow and unicorns when he is in the mix, because he’s waiting for the bird to slip. Rogers should tamper down his bugging…”

“Or ‘the cat’ will piss in his slippers?”

“Ha! No… I’ll place my bets on the stove exploding in his face. Steve is very predictable in his routines – even I noticed what time he goes on his runs and that’s a problem.”

***

He fell asleep curled up on the very blanket he prepared for Snowflake, while the cryo-chamber still puffed steam like a miniature volcano puffed smoke. DUM-E must have taken pity on him at some point and covered him with the ratty Afghan usually reserved for the couch… scratchy, yet warm and smelling of coffee.

…woke up to the feeling of fingers running through his hair. The manner was familiar, the fingers - not so much. Tony leaned into the touch all the same, because… sleeping through the dramatic moment of a great reveal apparently is his new style now. Blame the stress, people.

“Snowflake?” half-asleep still, all Tony could offer was half-coherent mumbling. The mark on his
wrist tickled with fondness and mirth, sending sparks of joy up his arm.

“Привет, солнышко (Hi, sunshine),” the voice was different too: deeper, harboring a smoky quality, but, thanks to a long period of disuse, now it sounded less like sex and more like wheezy hissing. The vocal cords must be giving him a world of pain…

“How are you? Stupid question, I know…”

“… я жив (… alive). Все болит… что хорошо (Everything aches… which is good).”

“Oh…” they were at step one of their relationship all over again, which sucked, but unlike those horrendous days… they weren’t helpless anymore. “Say hi, Friday…”

“Приветик, мистер Винтер! (Hi there, Mister Winter!)” baby-girl didn’t disappoint, embarrassing the daylights out of her creator, so Tony unashamedly hid his rapidly reddening face in… his Soldier’s very naked (and very scared) thigh. Snowflake laughed… and he felt it more than he actually heard it. Again… throat, vocal cords… pain.

Tony was almost afraid to look up… the hand in his hair soothed some of his worries away, though.

“Все хорошо, Антоша (It’s alright, Antosha). Знаешь, как у нас говорят? (Do you know what they say in Russia?) Шрамы украшают мужчину (Scars make a man)”

Tony looked up then, ready to protest and prove him wrong… only to be met with a pair of startling blue eyes, alight with amusement and humor. He narrowed his eyes in return, accepting the challenge.

“Why do I have a feeling that I’ve been tricked?”

“Не знаю (I don’t know). Может, потому что это правда (Maybe, because it is true)?”

And that’s when all his worries flew right out the proverbial window. Insufferable man! He swatted him with a blanket corner, feeling a pout creeping in. His soulmate was laughing again, silently this time, to not aggravate his throat further, white teeth flashing in an open, wolfish grin…

Yakov Zimin was not someone who you’d call conventionally beautiful. Tony had seen prettier people in his time, models and socialites alike, but… the big ‘but’ in this story being that he forgot what they looked like as soon as they left his bedroom. Yakov with his stoic curl of lips, high cheekbones, strong jawline, noble nose and soul piercing gaze he’ll never forget, because the first part of that hypothetical evening he would have wasted on flirting just to get his attention and the rest of it - on making a fool of himself only to see him smile, and if the somber Russian decided to leave with him, it would have been totally worth it.

There were scars, obviously: a long gash, resembling a claw mark, across his forehead and a much smaller scar on his chin… shrapnel? Yakov was as naked as the day he was born, so yes, Tony’s gaze eventually ventured lower, taking in… well, everything. His Soldier was strong, had been strong before the War, before the camps, before the serum. Tony never noticed, but there was a difference between muscles cultivated on proteins and heaving weights in the gym and those built by hard work. An ideal power to speed ratio ingrained in a strong, yet lean frame. Wolves too seem shaggy and lanky creatures, when you watch them in a zoo… until you see them run in the wild, see them hunt…

‘Lower’ was also the place where the true nightmare began: bullet wounds, knife wounds, lacerations, claw marks and bite marks, some wounds looking like he had to tear whatever went in there out and do it fast. Who was Tony to judge, though? He had a nightmare of his own right in the
middle of his chest. Then he saw the shoulder...

Tony couldn’t help himself. He growled at that hunk of junk. A steampunk installation – that’s what it was, not a shoulder, not an arm!

“How the hell Barnes got a functioning appendage and you got this shit? It’s fucking rusted! And the joint! Don’t get me going about the joint – even DUM-E has a wider range of movement than you!”

“He… is… younger… than me… too.”

“Oh! English! So you do speak it?”

“A little… present… from James, but I think… I knew the language… before? Somebody… taught me… when I… was smaller,” Yakov made a small inviting gesture for the engineer to lay his head back on his lap; Tony, sensing something interesting coming, complied readily and relaxed when calloused fingers returned to their soothing stroking. “My grandfather was a doctor… a man of science, quite famous for his study in medicinal herbs… my mother wanted to walk in his steps.”

“In the second half of the XIX century? Daring woman!”

“Very. She once told us that meeting her soulmate was her greatest fear…”

“Because that meant marriage and the death of her dreams… not many husbands would understand such interests.”

“Yes… When my father showed up at their doorstep for the first time and she learned the reason behind his visit, she threw a teapot at him… Luckily, father was a military officer with quick reflexes and ducked in time. Grandfather was shocked…”

“I bet! But you’re here, so that means… he won her over?”

“He often joked that fighting in the Crimean war was easier… and she always swatted him with a towel for that, grumbling… in Latin, I think. They made a striking pair: a petite bossy woman with a shock of blond hair wrestled into a messy braid, and a tall intimidating looking Russian Imperial Army officer, always clean shaven and meticulously dressed…” Yakov fell silent for a few moments, focusing on his past, his memories. “The Revolution changed everything. Grandfather lost his position as lecturer in a prestigious Medical College in Petersburg, because he never supported the communist idea. All former imperial military officers, of high ranks especially, were under heavy scrutiny, because the government was hunting for traitors and supporters of the royalist faction… no one really cared were you a royalist or not – what mattered was you not being a communist in the end. Father knew where this was heading and went into early retirement. He hid his medals, sold our house and got us packing. We left Petersburg, moving to Irkutsk as soon as we were able… mother was pregnant.”

“Snowflake…”

“We were relatively safe there… no one knew who we were or where we came from… and the local hospital had a shortage of doctors and nurses. Father wasn’t happy to sit at home with us kids (me and the newborn twins), but he never complained… when he found a job as a forest keeper, sibling care became my responsibility. We lived very poor, Antosha, to the point of scavenging for eatable plants in the woods… complicated times, yet grandfather continued his life’s work… inspiring dedication…”

“Mhm, indeed. Did I ever tell you the story how I gave a terrorist organization my home address? May have been the stupidest decision of my life… and the most needed one, I guess, because that
way I learned how to be me again… not the billionaire, not the showman… just the mechanic….
Sometimes you need to lose everything to find everything…”

“Clever and wise…”

“If you make an old man pun, I swear…”

“I’m tempted… and if you are old, my sunshine, what would people make of me?”

“Ha! Good one… but I have to ask: why are we still sitting on the floor? You’re tired, achy…
hungry… that arm most likely is giving you grief…”

Yakov shook his head and asked:

“How is James fairing?”

“Integrating, hitting it off with Sunny… Did you know they were soulmates?”

“I felt the pull… it was similar to the one I feel for you. It helped Arseniy endure, helped him run…
helped him find James again.”

“Think they will be alright?”

“They will. It is not them I’m worried about…”

“…James will bite back. He’s not that basically trained puppy Uncle Sam shipped to war anymore.
Has Rogers noticed, I wonder?”

They both knew the answer was ‘no’.

“Let me take you to bed, Antosha.”

Tony couldn’t help it - he started giggling, the last of the nerves finally fading away.

“Wow… fresh out of the freezer and straight to the heart of the issue… I like it.”

“Sleep, lyubov moya (love of mine), is the only thing that will be happening between those sheets,
although I am not opposed to your other suggestions… for later… want to learn you… want you to
learn me…”

Tony gave a slight moan of appreciation to the perspectives, nuzzling into his light’s toned
stomach…

“Take me to bed then… so we can savoir that ‘later’ later…”

***

Morning came and with it a new discovery.

They lay in their bed, in comfortable silence: Tony on his back, marveling in the serum induced heat,
while his Soldier, fulfilling the need for protectiveness and possessiveness, turned himself into a
barrier between them and the world. The engineer’s fingers busied themselves with exploring the
expanse of Yakov’s back, extra careful in the left shoulder area, trying to understand the logistics
behind the metal implants and the system of anchoring points…

That’s when he noticed it, the differences in skin texture. He shot Yakov a questioning glance:
“You have a tattoo?”

The smile he received was crooked and wry, tainted with sadness.

“I do.”

“Can I see?”

“…yes.”

There was an artfully done Hydra symbol on his nape, inked in flashy red. The same flashy red ink trailed down the length of his spine forming words that should’ve made him sick - ‘HAIL HYDRA’ – the last ‘A’ ending on the small of his back.

Tony caressed every letter… and smiled a sad smile of his own, when he felt Yakov release a shaky breath he, probably, didn’t realize he was holding.

“I like the red… my favorite color, as you may have noticed.”

“The armor was a giveaway, yes.”

“… was it willing?”

“It was a brand… meant to be symbolic, not beautiful.”

“Move over, I want to kiss it all better…”

His Soldier huffed a laugh into the pillow near Tony’s ear, surprised by his acceptance, no doubt, and obliged…

***

They raided James’s closet for a pair of sweatpants and Tony dug up his favorite hoodie, because… Winter was no longer coming – it was already here, pun totally intended. Their workshop kitchen was in dire need of restocking, Tony could order take-out, but… hunger won over the need to wait however long.

They went to the common kitchen… only to find themselves in the middle of the shouting match. Well, Rogers shouted. James snarled back.

“Steven Grant Rogers, you are not going anywhere, much less to the workshop! I don’t care what she says, because I am not keen on letting you make a potentially fatal mistake. Leave the man alone!”

“But, Bucky!”

“’But Bucky’ nothin’! I’ve known you my whole life, Stevie, and I sure as hell don’t need some freakin’ super-power to know when you’re lookin’ to get your ass kicked!”

“Why are you protecting him? After all Hydra did to you?!”

“Don’t you bring Hydra into this! It’s Tony, isn’t it? So far gone on him that you can’t think straight?”

Steve, to Tony’s horror, started spluttering like he always did when anything ‘fondue’-ish entered the picture.
“What are you talking about?!”

“The name ‘Becky Simmons’ ring a bell?”

“That’s… it’s not the same!”

“Oh, yeah? You outing her brother to the cops when she said she didn’t want to go with you to prom!”

“… I’m still going!”

“And what’s your plan, huh? Knock Tony out, pry open the cryo-tube and break *him* into a million pieces?”

“He’s not innocent! He made you do all those things, kill all those people!”

“So you are gonna’ do… what? Put the man down like some dog, then saunter over to Tony and say ‘Hey, you don’t know it yet, but I saved your life, so how about grabbing a couple of bites together later this evening’?”

“Bucky!” Steve was red, from anger or shame, it was hard to say. “I won’t ever do that!”

“Well, you kept the deaths of his parent from him, so I honestly don’t know!”

Tony, feeling a wave of dread rising, instinctively leaned closer into Yakov’s space. The Soldier silently pulled him in with his flesh hand, letting him cuddle into his side. Steve, in the meantime, made some conclusions of his own.

“You’ve changed, Bucky…”

“You did too.”

“No, not that… how did you know about Becky’s brother?”

“Wow! After all the talk *this* is what you ask?” James sighed in exasperation. “We couldn’t date, so we agreed to meet from time to time. His mate turned out to be some German fellow, I was free, so things happened…”

“Oh. My. God… were you going to tell me?”

“After what you’ve done to him, I decided not to risk it.”

“…”

“Also met his mate in Germany, imagine that. He was a Nazi tank officer, so instead of killing him I told him if he wanted to see his mate at all he’ll have to try and stay alive, go to the States and get him out of jail. Hope I shocked him enough to do just that…”

“There was a rather daring breakout from one of New York prisons in 1947,” Friday was happy to chime in, distracting them all. “One of the prison buses was ambushed by a high jacked armored vehicle. The bus was in shambles, ten dead, many injured. The attacker shot the guards and started shouting for one ‘Riley Simmons’. Witnesses mention that he had a strong German accent…”

“Well I’ll be damned… he did it! What of Riley?”

“Hmm… according to witness testimonies, one Riley Simmons was indeed on that bus.
Unfortunately, there is little footage that I can show you, but there is one newspaper clipping…”

The image was pretty good… for its time. The ‘armored vehicle’ Fri described was in truth a trophy German heavy tank ‘Tiger’ which plowed through the bus like it was made of paper. Bodies lay everywhere, some in guard uniforms, but the majority in striped prison garbs. In the middle of this chaos were two people…

A tall guy dressed in stripes was most likely Riley Simmons, gaunt and a lot thinner than it was considered healthy, but even from this poor photo it was fairly obvious that prison life didn’t break him, not for the lack of trying. His soulmate, the infamous former German tank officer, was almost his polar opposite: on the smaller side, build like a runner and blond. The photo was divided into two parts: on one they were just staring at each other transfixed, on the other Riley was kissing his mate silly.

“What was his name?” Tony’s unexpected question made the two super-soldiers jump. “The German guy…”

“Gantram Bernstein.”

“Mister Bernstein has style I’ll give him that… Did they get away, Fri?”

“Yeah, Boss, in the ‘Tiger’. The police tried giving chase, but Mister Bernstein wasn’t named one of Third Reich’s aces for nothing. They must have left the States, because the next mentioning I found was from Switzerland several years later. Mister Bernstein collected the assets that weren’t confiscated by the new German government, mainly the remains of his family’s fortune. The next mentioning refers to them moving back to Germany and settling in the city of Hamburg, where Mister Bernstein opened a furniture renovation workshop and bookstore. Mister Simmons, apparently, was very skilled with his hands and an excellent carpenter, so they made it work. The last reference is of 29th December 1998…”

“The day of their passing?” Bucky allowed the sadness and grief to color his voice. Steve just looked pained.

“Yes. I am sorry.”

“Well, at least, they had time… I reckon you heard everything, Tony?”

“Only the part about Becky and Steve’s crush… oh, and guys? Meet Yakov Zimin, my better half… in the flesh this time.”

The Soldier smiled, all teeth and edgy madness, blue eyes blizzard cold.

“И вам тоже здоровствуйте… (And hello to you too…)”

***

The thought of sharing Tony with James evoked no jealousy - they had a lot in common, including a body once upon a time. James will always be special… another little brother to take care of. Steve Rogers, on the other hand, was nothing of the sort.

Yakov heard about him – rumors found their way even inside Nazi prison camps, but brought only empty hopes, because Captain America, the mighty hero, never came, not for the likes of them…

As soon as the first injection was made he knew that for him there won’t be a good homecoming. His parents, now old and grief-stricken, would mourn, his sisters would cry and his youngest brother
Vsevolod… little Seva, would have to learn to be the man of the house. He wished his family one final good-bye…

That same night, burning up in chemical fever, he decided to kill them all, these people in white coats and grey-black uniforms. Tear their throats out with his teeth if he had to. It takes a monster to kill a monster, though. After all the experiments and surgeries Zola subjected him to, not much human was left in him to feel the wrongness of the sentiment anyway...

And now the same Steve Rogers had been harboring amorous feelings for his sunshine… pulling his proverbial braids… putting sticks in his proverbial wheels to get his attention… you don’t hurt the person you love. In most parts of the world such a behavior could (and would) get you in trouble to the point of your teeth being ‘checked’, dentist not required…

Being Captain America, as Tony would say, had its perks and privileges.

…Unacceptable.

James, smart man, must have sensed the shift in the atmosphere, because suddenly he was all smiles and charm, offering them tea and sandwiches. Tony, all charm and smiles of his own, media issue perfection, said they would be delighted to join. Rogers said nothing, turning away to put some bread in the toaster.

“I never asked, though, how are your cacti doing? Trevor and his merry band… I remember them.”

“Oh! Mini-T sprouted his first flower last week.”

“Nice! Blue or red?”

“Ha… purple!”

They bumped fists, metal to flesh, and James went to fill the kettle with water and put it to boil the old fashion way. Steve continued to make toast.

“Grilled cheese?”

“Yes! And coffee. Do not forget my elixir of life, young padawan!”

“Hah… don’t get the reference, though. And you, Big Brother?”

Yakov raised a quizzical eyebrow at the nickname. James smiled back, all fake innocence. Cheeky brat…

“I’ll settle for tea, thank you…”

“The usual?”

“Would be nice. How is your therapy moving along?”

“Sam helps a lot. The new psychiatrist, SHIELD provided us with, is also nice… a harmless looking granny, sporting a Miss Marple-ish vibe, if you know what I mean.”

“Fishing for gossip like the last one did?”

“We tested her. She passed.”

“Good. The Words?”
James turned serious.

“We tested it yesterday: Colonel Rhodes read the Words, while Sam and Kotya (Cutie Cat) supervised… they still shut me down, which means I’m not safe to be around people yet,” he gave Steve’s back the stink eye. “So until we sort this out I’m not signing up for anything, here that, Stevie?”

Two stacks of toast were placed on the table, and Steve, back too straight for comfort, started cutting the cheese. Yakov watched him, twirling a coin he found in the hoodie pocket in his flesh fingers…

Tony, being Tony, ignored the last part, concentrating on the first.

“Hold on a sec… what do you mean by ‘they shut you down’?”

James paused for a second, trying to formulate the perfect comparison.

“It’s like a knock-down in boxing: ten good hits and ‘lights out’. I even have a hunch why - with Big Brother gone, there is no one to steer the ship…”

“… might even be true, you know.”

“So, until we unravel this ball of yarn, me and Kotya are benched.”

“He has trigger words too?” this Tony didn’t know.

“Yeah. Not like mine, though. While mine make me compliant, his make him go berserk… and his Book is still out there somewhere.”

“He doesn’t know them?”

“No. Berserk, remember?”

The kettle started whistling – a good sign. Steve covered the toasts with slices of cheese before loading them into the oven. James busied himself with mixing tea, while Fri started the coffee machine…

“What about you, Snowflake? Do we have to worry?”

“No, there were no words for me.”

“Why?”

“There weren’t needed.”

***

Red tarp? Meet bull.

The teapot went flying and James jumped, shielding the shocked to the bones engineer from the spray of boiling hot water, English and Russian curses a startling mix on his tongue. Yakov evaded the pot and water both, and flicked the coin he was playing with at Steve’s right eye. Steve ducked, super human reflexes serving him well… or not, because the seconds he lost with the coin, cost him dearly…

The Soldier’s metal arm, as outdated as it was, was still a weapon. His sunshine gifted him with a beautiful multi-tool which now belonged to James; Hydra settled for a battering ram. Either way, it
was a solid piece of quality metal.

The Soldier decked Captain America with enough force that it broke. No matter. Pain is useful. It helps to remember and never forget.

…Rogers was deaf to its voice.

The hit may have dazed him, but the serum made quick work of that. Steve was only starting to rise, mind buzzing with plans made and discarded, when a very much flesh hand got him by the neck and lifted as if he once again was five foot nothing with a cap on and weighed no more than a kitten. No table bashing, no broken granite counter tops, no human shapes indents in fridges…

“Listen, little pup, and listen well…” English words rolled with a distinctive rumble of hard Russian consonants made a cold shiver creep up his spine. “You are stubborn, think you know best, and think you are doing your best… so, for your efforts, you deserve the best. Simple logic… but faulty. Anthony Edward Stark is mine: to care, to love and to protect. Pay this to mind – you won’t be hearing it again…”

“Put me down, you son of a bitch, and I’ll show you… logic!”

“I doubt you could show me anything… even if you try. I, for the matter, could show you a great deal of things. Respect, for instance, and the value of ‘no’,” blue eyes bore into blue eyes; ones unwavering, others trying to be the same. “James?”

“I’m fine. Tony’s also fine, if a bit spooked… never been scalded with boiling water before, doll?”

“It’s been always ‘stale and muddled’ for me, J.B.,” Tony’s voice was shaking, panic attack just around the corner. “The ever loving fuck!? Snowflake, your arm…”

“… is not important, solnyshko. What is troubling is this love/hate relationship… little pup thinks he is a big dog, barking at the wrong trees with no fear of punishment… didn’t your parents teach you manners?”

“I knew them at least!”

“And you think I did not?”

“I know all I need! You’re Hydra and you need to die! I don’t care what it takes!”

“Such devotion,” Yakov shook his head in silent disappointment, when a thought occurred to him… interesting and self-explanatory to a point. “Do you have a mate, Captain America? Many thought, it was Margaret ‘Peggy’ Carter, now, though, I wonder if they were mistaken… the way you act… it must have been someone precious to you, someone close? And I killed him before you had the guts to do anything… only one person comes to mind - Howard Stark, the genius inventor. How unfortunate… or maybe not? Either way, your, as you Americans say, beef is with me… leave Tony out of it.”

“Bullshit! The whole lot of you - are a bunch of bloody traitors!”

The Soldier didn’t do threats well - actions proved to be more effective…

His sunshine stopped him. Must have sensed the fiery fury lacing the bond, which was never a sign of a happy ending for the person on the receiving end.

“Yakov… Yasha… killing Steve will solve precisely one problem, but in the long run… causes more
trouble than its worth. So much for a happy breakfast... Now, you! I’m sorry for your loss, Steve. I had no idea; dad never showed me (or mother) his mark, but your idea of finding his replacement in me and then finding me lacking... what were you expecting?! I’m not him! I’ll never be him... let’s get out of here... take care, Barnes.”

James was sad.

“... yeah, take care.”

He knew they were leaving.

***

Pepper understood. Tony couldn’t stomach staying in the Compound any longer, the walls making him almost physically sick, and he could work from virtually any place with a stable Internet connection.

Pepper understood, sure, but the look in her beautiful eyes... spoke volumes. She was with him through thick and thin, always had his back. This time was no exception.

“Should I contact the lawyer team?”

“No.”

“Why? It’s clearly a harassment case, bordering on physical abuse!”

“Well, Pep, if you say so, then it’s probably true. Not the first time I’ve been used as someone else’s substitute... but it’s the first time I don’t want to cause a scandal.”

“Okay... but if you ever decide to change your mind, I’ll have everything ready.”

“Thank you.”

This settled the billionaire packed his travel bag. The bare necessities: a few pairs of underwear, socks, shirts, a sweater and jeans, ID, laptop, starkphone... briefcase armor.

“Sneakers, boots or dress-shoes, honeybunch?”

“Boots.”

“Oh, so you called your brother. How is he by the way?”

“Shocked. Happy. Relieved. Cursed at me rather creatively, but this is actually a good sign.”

“Yeah? How come?”

“It means we are family... despite everything.”

“He won’t mind me tagging along?”

Yakov smiled. He had a beautiful smile; a rare occurrence, that needs to be cherished.

“No. Seva is, in fact, very curious what man is brave enough to settle with the likes of me. I am, as you may have noticed, an asshole...”

“What do you know? So am I!”
“He is also an engineer, albeit in a different field…”

“A colleague!”

“He worked in construction, until retirement. Bridges and tunnels he designed and oversaw building are still considered ones of the safest in the world,” his Soldier looked a little sheepish. “We may have played with Google a bit: him bragging, me singing praises…”

Tony laughed, feeling a part of the heaviness settled over his heart fade…

The decision to disappear was instantaneous. Steve’s words were still ringing in his ears, the image of his Soldier’s left arm falling apart with a peculiar sound of dying metal was still fresh in his memory… he fought off the panic attack by shire force of will.

Thanks for a new set of revelations, Steve! These he would have lived fine without.

Steve… and Howard Stark. A sickly Brooklyn art student and a millionaire, who had no idea he existed… the first time round. It took a potentially deadly serum turning the boy into an example of human perfection to change that… was it even love?

Steve must feel cheated.

He didn’t give a fuck what Steve must feel.

Once they reached the workshop, Tony stabilized the arm’s condition: turning off pain sensors, wrapping exposed nerve endings, closing the stump. He cleaned off the rust too.

Yasha’s mark was in the same place as on the vibranium arm – the top half of the shoulder. It read ‘Snowflake?’ just like he thought it would.

They went off the grid the same day, leaving behind a burner phone with an emergency number and a note not to call unless the world is burning. Then there was a direct flight to Moscow, where they switched to local airlines booking a flight to Novosibirsk. Familiar sights! From there they had to choose: rent a car or take the bus to Irkutsk.

“How long will it take by car?”

“Several days.”

“Let’s take the car.”

For their vehicle Yakov chose an old jeep, ever the practical man. On day two of the journey Tony understood why. The roads in Russia were shitty.

“There are two problems in this country,” said his light with a philosophical air about him, when they got stuck for the first time. “The fools and the roads.”

“The roads I understand. Why the fools, though?”

“You see, Antosha, a Russian fool – is not a temporary trait, but a lifelong diagnosis.”

The billionaire thought about it, while they, knee deep in dirt, pushed the jeep out of the enormous puddle.

“The really don’t change?”
“If they did, we would have the same excellent road system as the States do… probably.”

“Probably?” now he was amused.

“You cannot calculate foolishness in precise numbers… always a shame.”

They saved the jeep, but now both needed a shower. Spring or no spring, but the warm days were far away still, so skinny dipping in streams was out of the question. Yakov, though, seemed to have a plan, judging by the mischievous gleam in his eyes…

They set up camp, started the fire and that’s when his Soldier showed him the inflatable kiddy pool…

“Seriously?” Tony was struggling between feeling scandalized and appreciating the humor. His mate was outright smirking at him by now.

“I can heat up some water. There is a spring right… over… there.”

“You want to see me naked, admit it.”

“I do… and I would also like to be the one to help you bathe…”

“When you put it this way… let me help.”

There was nothing particularly romantic in washing from a big ten liter bucket in the middle of the woods, using a tea mug to scoop the hot water with, but at the same time Tony was having the time of his life. It was like college all over again that one time when the pipes broke and they had to survive on water rations for a week, only better.

The logistics were easy: you jump into the kiddy pool, get the grime and sweat wet, soap yourself up, get rinsed and jump out onto the grass to dry off with the help a fluffy towel. It was rather chilly despite being near the fire, so you had to be fast and jump into the tent before you catch a cold. The small space heater they brought along made it almost cozy inside… that and the sleeping bags, rolled one on top of the other, a nest made for two.

He had to assist Yasha a bit with the rinsing, the man being one-armed and all, but all in all they settled for the night nice and clean. The Soldier began the daily ritual of cleaning his guns (judging by the easefulness that only comes with long practice, he’s been doing it one-armed for quite some time), while Tony checked his emails. The first update from Friday was also there.

How the situation in the Compound could be described? Well, their absence has been noticed… and that’s putting it lightly. Rhodey found the note and phone. Saw the open cryo-chamber too. Didn’t take long for him put two and two together. In matter of minutes he had the resident Avengers assembled, Ross and Fury on the phone, even went as far as calling Wakanda! T’Chala was not impressed…

“Think they’ll find us?”

“They might. But it would be infinitely more difficult here. A normal cellphone would have lost reception by now.”

Tony preened. His tech was the best for a reason! It didn’t last long though.

“Nat, probably, knows this too and probably told them already.”
“Hm, she is a professional. Might have told them what kind of car we have chosen too and there are always spy satellites, but… we are on Russian territory. When you spy on them… and are not Tony Stark or his AI, they notice.”

“So we’re shielded by the state’s special military and cybernetic defense divisions… huh.”

“To a degree. They knew about SHIELD (not directly, but knew that such an Agency exists), now they know about Hydra, a veritable Nazi and terrorist organization on their doorstep. Everybody is on edge…”

“…and, as a result, extra vigilante.”

“Yes. You see, in Russia people don’t like uninvited guests very much. There is even a saying that an uninvited guest is worse than an invader, and invaders here are fought off rather viciously… terrorists too. After the Chechnya Campaigns the government policy regarding them is very clear…”

“Fri had trouble explaining what the phrase ‘мочить в сортире’ means… sounds intriguing, though.”

Yasha huffed a laugh, before wiggling his eyebrows suggestively a bit:

“Well, basically, it means dunking them in the toilet, you know, the yard kind, but I think what he really meant was that they’ll hunt them down and kill them everywhere, no matter the hiding place… the yard toilet being the last place you’ll look.”

“And the president said that on national TV?!”

“Yes.”

“And people love him.”

“He kept his word. President Putin is not an emotional man, so when he does express emotions they are genuine. KGB training makes him think before he acts.”

“No wonder Fury hates him…”

“You cannot love everyone,” with a satisfying click the final piece of the handgun slid into place, and the Soldier turned serious. “Sadly, we used our own passports to book the plane tickets, so we could be traced up to Novosibirsk. If we took the bus, we’d lead them to Irkutsk…”

“But we rented the car… some beat up jeep… and how popular is this model exactly?” Tony caught on fast. “If I understand your approving hum correctly, very.”

“When you left to inspect our ‘ride’, I changed the deal a bit and bought it… with cash.”

The engineer nodded.

“Thus making us practically untraceable… where’s the money from, though?”

“The man tried to be clever and make some extra dollars on two unsuspecting foreigners and charged us double. He won’t be doing such things again…”

Well, at least the car was decent. There was room for improvement too, and the mechanic in him couldn’t wait to dig in elbows deep in a genuine Russian motor. The sounds it made on the drive were very promising.
“We will reach the main road sometime tomorrow.”

“I’ll miss the forest.”

“Of course, you will.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Family and family history...
... but life always catches up with you in the end.

Chapter Notes

a domestic chapter, basically... with a little sexy scene)
English is still not my Native language, so they might be mistakes - feedback is much appreciated)


The dog was huge.

Someone cut its ears and tail nearly completely off. Big paws with thick white claws, short thick fur, white with light-brown patches, fangs the size of his pinkie finger, keen yellowish-brown eyes that follow your every move… and the stillness. The stillness was freaking unnatural. Any normal dog would have barked at least once by now… this monster just sat by the front steps and watched.

Tony saw a lot of dogs in his life (purse-size chihuahuas and fuzz-ball poodles being the bulk of them with a rare police dog of unidentified breed in between), but nothing like this…

They found the house with relative ease. The city changed over the years, some streets living on under different names, some - disappearing completely. Modern buildings grew through and around the old city center. What remained the same were the river and the sky…

Yakov was shocked. Tony was shocked too, albeit for a different reason. The city was big, but he knew big cities, growing up in New York, but this… this was being big without being stuffy. And the churches, lots of artfully built old churches surrounded by their very own gardens: Orthodox Cristian, Catholic, Lutheran… there was even a honest to God forest within the city’s limits!

Vsevolod Zimin lived on the outskirts of town, away from the hassle and buzz of the city center. A small two-story building with a small flower garden in the front yard and a vast tree garden in the back, some trees there older and higher than the house they grew near. They parked by the gates, rang the doorbell. Tony was about to touch the handle, when Yakov stopped him and pointed somewhere to his right…

The dog. Watching. It didn’t even blink.

“What now?”

“Now we wait for someone to come out…”
Made sense, but there was one question that was bothering him, though… that yellow-eyed fiend was by no means an ordinary canine. To expect an ordinary reaction from him would have been… well, stupid.

“Hypothetically speaking… if I opened the gate, what would’ve happened?”

“Me and White Fang over there would have fought: I on your behalf, he – as the house protector.”

“That’s…” Tony’s blood ran cold; speaking about unordinary reactions!

“Barbaric?” Yakov gave him a slight, understanding smile.

“Yes! The word I’ve been looking for!”

“Well, it’s all simple for him: protect your master, protect your dwelling, and fend off the wolves. I know this breed… the Central Asian Shepherd Dog, considered one of the oldest in the world…”

“How old exactly?”

“Four thousand years ago his ancestors protected sheep herds and shepherds from predators and bandits in the mountains of Central Asia. Natural selection almost all the way…”

“That’s some history… but you’re worried. Why?”

“Seva was attacked by a dog when he was still a boy… bitten badly. Their merry band of friends decided to steal some plums from the neighbors, thought the dog was tied up… it was not. The other boys managed to climb the fence and run. Seva, on the other hand, always preferred books over games…”

“The bookish type…”

“Hm. He was lucky Uncle Fedya, whose garden they got into, heard the screaming and managed to wrestle the dog off him. He was also the one to carry him to the doctor… and speak with father and me. Seva has been afraid of dogs ever since… to the point of panic attacks.”

“Things change, Snowflake. Because that is not your ordinary dog… the intelligence in those eyes… he’s smarter than some of the people I have to do business with.”

“You mean Hammer?”

“Oh, you know him?”

“His guns suck.”

If he wasn’t in love with this man by now, he just fell in love with him all over again. The urge to hug him was strong, irresistible even, so Tony just went up and did it. Yakov went eerily still for a couple of seconds, before relaxing into it, slowly, inch by agonizing inch…

His Soldier was touch-starved. So the genius just hugged him tighter, rambling at that…

“You know, I’ve always wanted a pet: a kitten, a puppy… hell, even a turtle. Dad had other ideas as to how I should be spending my time, though. When I… when we built that robo-dog, and he trashed it… another dream to give up on. Later when I started falling into working binges, I thought maybe he was right… I couldn’t even look after myself, how could I look after another living thing?”

“You would have done fine, dusha moya (soul of mine).”
“You think?”

“Animals tend to let you know if they want something… if the personality isn’t trained out of them, of course. Cats will get in your face, meow or crash things. Dogs would whine, pull on your pant legs or even nip you to get your attention. You would have noticed a pattern after a few false starts or developed a robot-caretaker… but that wouldn’t be fun. You like to do things you enjoy yourself.”

“Only a few?”

“Two at most. You are a genius, after all.”

“Oh, Snowflake! Where were you all my life?”

“Frozen solid?” but there was a smile in his voice, one Tony was happy to return, with a seductive twist to it too.

“Always loved popsicles… how come we never put this wicked passion of mine to good use?”

That got him a laugh, but Yakov wasn’t flinching away, wasn’t pushing him away. Got to be a plus in there somewhere; his Soldier was also surprisingly accepting, considering his traditional upbringing. Either he was always like this or… his parents knew? And supported him? In times, when ‘being different’ meant ‘living a solitary life’, this was a lot!

“Yasha, light of my life, did your parent actually know about the liking men part?”

“I never liked much of anyone, dearest. They all felt wrong, smelt wrong, sounded wrong. Father noticed, because he always did. But he was also a soldier (you served 25 years then from enlisting till retirement, if death didn’t find you first) and he saw lots of different things in his life. Even in his time soul bonds sometimes united people of the same gender… most never acted on it, leaving the bond purely platonic, but some did.”

“You talked about that too.”

“We did. But I had no mark - you weren’t born yet. He was also the one who told me about this being the possible reason for my apathy and gloom, because he saw this happen several times, with others. The most important part of our conversation, though, was in the phrase ‘you are our son and we will love you regardless of who you will bring home as your mate’. That gave me a lot to think about…”

Tony never met the man who was his Soldier’s father, but this man must be watching over them from heaven, because even from there he was more of a father to Tony than his biological father ever was.

“Let’s visit them sometime… if it’s alright.”

“They would have liked to meet you. Only ever saw me glooming around and staring people down into submission. Would have been nice to show them my happy face.”

“If this is you happy face, color me intrigued…”

“There are lots of embarrassing photos that Seva will be all too happy to show you…” Yasha tilted his head to the side, listening in to something far away. “Here he comes, by the way.”

Surprise, surprise! And they looked anything, but presentable… the businessman in him cringed. The mechanic, though, silenced him with a decisive ‘fuck it’.
He was the mechanic today.

***

Vsevolod Igorevich Zimin, on the wrong side of eighty, turned out to be what Tony would call a 'cool grandpa'. He inherited the fiery temperament and thirst for knowledge from their mother’s side, but Tony wasn’t fooled. He was his Soldier’s brother which meant he had nerves of steel by default.

The dog’s name turned out to be Misha, from ‘медведь’ (bear). Well, he sure had the size for the name. He didn’t have a doghouse, but there was a low cot made for him under the porch. Tony was shocked to find out that he hadn’t reached his full size yet.

“Just how big do they get?!” Tony was eyeing the canine with a new fascination. Misha had the audacity to look smug.

“Boys get about 70 centimeters in height,” Seva spoke English well, and the accent didn’t bother any of them; this was not about perfection. “Misha is still a puppy.”

“You overcame your fear, bratishka (little brother)!”

“I learned to live with it. And this uvalen’ (big clumsy fellow) won’t ever hurt me... he is too smart for that.”

“Where did you find him, though?”

“Have my grandchildren to thank! Nina’s to-be-boyfriend tried to be romantic and presented her a cute puppy as a gift, but then ‘cutie’ started growing and growing and didn’t stop, so... she carted the pup off here! ‘Grandpa, can you keep him? Our apartment in very small and you live alone anyway...’ Later we learned that that particular boyfriend was labeled a scumbag and all his gifts were thrown away. The dog stayed here ever since...” Seva sighed, a bit exasperated at the mysterious Nina’s antics. “But enough of that... please, come in! Sadly, I don’t have a garage to hide the car in, but there is a big piece of parachute silk to cover it with.”

“Oh...”

“I know who you’re hiding from, Yasha,” the old engineer’s eyes shined with mischief. “We do have television too. Oh, what happened to my manners... it is a pleasure to meet you, Mister Stark.”

“Please call me Tony. Only one person went by the name ‘Mister Stark’ and he’s long dead and buried...”

Mister Zimin didn’t comment, but he understood who the American was referring to... and let it go.

“Then you should call me Seva. We are family now... and ‘Vsevolod Igorevich’ is a mouthful only my students should suffer from.”

“Oh, you teach?”

“I was offered a place at the local state university. It gets boring here with only Misha for company and with my mind is still sharp and my hands - steady, I agreed!”

“Nice!”

“I think so too!”

And just like that they were in, being thoroughly sniffed at (Tony may have squeaked when a big
wet nose hit the palm of his hand rather suddenly), before actually entering the house. Yakov took care of the jeep while Tony helped their host carry the food filled bags into the kitchen…

Soon they found themselves in the back yard lounging in old basket-chairs with tea and biscuits, showered and almost content. Misha lay at Seva’s feet, a miniature mountain of fur, warming his slipper clad feet, seemingly asleep. His short cropped ears twitched at every sound, though, giving him away.

Tony was halfway asleep, but he could still hear the conversation going on over him. Brothers had a lot to talk about, a rift of things unsaid almost a century long. The men knew he could hear them, so, as a sign of respect probably, they continued in English…

“How long will you be staying?”

“As long, as we are able to. Tony needs rest.”

“That bad, huh?”

“He has a lot on his plate: running a multibillion dollar company with offices all over the world, developing new technology, improving the existing one, consulting a super-secret spy agency and building them new better gadgets, being Ironman and all what that position entails… and they want him to do more.”

“The alien invasion everybody is talking about…”

“Yes. It is very much real and they will be here in the near future. The whole world is looking at my sunshine for solutions, because he is Tony Stark, and has solutions for every problem you can imagine lying around…. Sevushka, I want to kill them all.”

The old man gave him a knowing smile and an understanding look.

“I can imagine.”

“They will track us down to your doorstep eventually, but until then… we have time. I wanted to ask, though, what are the public opinions here? Regarding the Accords, the invasion and the Avengers…”

“I’ve never been interested in politics, but, fortunately for us both, my students very much are! Most of the people here support the Accords, their current version at least. There are families here where children display unusual abilities, and people who discover such abilities unexpectedly, in situations of extreme danger or stress, and with the Accords they can get help from the government legally, with no fear for their lives…”

“The big Hydra reveal…”

“Yes. This is why there are no known super-heroes in Russia – people prefer to stay off the radar if they can help it,” Seva paused. “The invasion, though. There were those who didn’t believe in it, still don’t, but ever since New York, these were few and far between. What is most interesting in a very unsettling way is that, while the whole world is preparing, here… we hear close to nothing.”

Yakov must have frowned, because his voice turned grave.

“Why?”

“Russia doesn’t participate in any of the UN talks regarding the issue… strangely, not for the lack of
wanting. We are never invited. So we prepare on our own, pray and hope for the best.”

“Hm.”

“The Avengers are another story. They are like movie stars! But that’s about it. If Baikal should ever decide to flood the nearby villages, nobody really expects them to swoop in and save the day.”

“Unsettling, indeed.”

“You are part of that team, are you not?”

“Not anymore. The truth came out, so they probably crossed my name off the official roster. I don’t really care about the Avengers Initiative, bratishka (little brother), but the Initiative sure cares about my sunshine…”

“If you want to be a proper shield for him, you will need a new arm, Big Brother.”

“Not you too…”

“Oh! Does someone else call you that?”

“… His name is James. He was a Sargent and we fought in the same War, albeit on different sides. And he was a science experiment too, for the same people I was, with the same result. And there is also Senya… Arseniy Kotov, my former student. Tony, though, calls him Sunny… he has a way with names, very spot on.”

“And what does he call you?”

They smirked at each other. Seva even wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, but Yasha looking all mysterious didn’t rise to the bait and sagely sipped his tea, answering:

“Wouldn’t you want to know?”

Tony smiled too, feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. Never knew that faking sleep would feel so good…

“What of you, Sevushka? Nina is more of a grandniece than a granddaughter, isn’t she?”

“You remember Volodya? You went to the same classes at the university…”

“… yes.”

“My mate. He didn’t make it back. It seemed unfair to marry, so I didn’t.”

“They sent me to sniper courses almost right away. If we were together, maybe…”

“No, Yashka. He died in a bombing and if you were with him, you would have died too. It was a long time ago, and I have a feeling I would be meeting him soon,” the old man’s smile was sad, but…it was obvious that he made peace with the situation. “Not that soon, but old age is nothing to sneeze at!”

“Oh, Seva…”

Their hug was heartbreaking. Tony forgot when was the last time he cried, but today… at this very moment… he wanted to.
“So… you have a degree,” Tony was so excited he couldn’t lie still; he found something new about his soulmate! “In what if you don’t mind my curiosity?”

“Geology and soils. Even wrote a thesis. Outdated by now, probably…”

“That’s… so cool!”

Yakov breathed out a laugh. His soulmate – always fascinated by the strangest things.

“No need to pretend, solnyshko. It is just rock, dirt and a bit of chemistry.”

“Did you go on field trips?”

“Every year.”

“So you must have a collection of neat stones in here somewhere! Like trophy collecting… only without the killing part.”

Hm… he does seem the type to do something like that.

“Did you have a collection too?”

“Yeah…”

“Coins, stamps, postcards?”

“… screws, actually.”

“How exciting.”

“Oh, shut up…”

***

Dawn.

Birds already awake and chirping away. Rays of sun light creeping in trough the flowery curtains, bathing their small cozy bedroom in morning brightness… too soon… way too soon… Tony wasn’t done, not by a longshot…

Metal, gun oil… pine and honey…Yakov. They looked each other in the eye, icy-blue into honey-brown, and that’s when the engineer knew: things are about to happen...

They walked this road many times and each time it was something special, but today they will be stepping on a whole new trail. Lazy morning desire, adorably awkward and somewhat clumsy, morphed into dizzying heat, flowing lava slow between them, filling the bond to the brim...

His Soldier got him pinned in moments… open, vulnerable… wanted. Heavy… not to the point of suffocating, not the crushing kind… playful… Foreheads touching, noses rubbing against each other tenderly, before spiraling down into biting kisses, all teeth and nips and blood… Tony gave as good, as he got. After, though, were gentle licks and apologetic purrs…

Sorry, I never meant to…
I don’t mind, it will heal…

Needy moans and wanton keens, possessive growls and appreciative hissing – their new language. And then Yakov was making love to the arc reactor shining bright within his chest…

“Ah, Snowflake!”

“Sing for me, dusha moya (soul of mine)… don’t hold it in… want to hear you more than anything…”

“You sure, sugarplum? I’m loud…”

“Oh, I know…”

Tony’s giggling broke off into a gasp, when he felt hot slightly chapped lips on his nipple, kissing, worrying it with kitten licks, before biting down… one hand ended up in Yasha’s hair, long and dark, pulling, the other – clawing at his metal shoulder, pulling him closer…

“Jesus… fuck! Where’d you…”

“I am a bad man, zolotse (precious)… I didn’t save myself for you…”

“Thank God you didn’t!”

The Soldier smirked… and dove lower, worshiping every scar he found along the way. Tony knew he had plenty. The armor saved him from the grave stuff… usually, but it took a special sort of courage to go into fights with the suit that had a few protective lairs less. That one time they had to pry Ironman off a metal reinforcement pole when he was thrown through a skyscraper by the villain of the week… Yakov found that scar and kissed it too.

The boxers made him pause…

Tony, feeling 100% a cat that got the cream, snickered:

“You thought I was kidding, right?”

“… not exactly, but…” his light, eyes sparkling with humor, nuzzled the red star on the waistband of his midnight-black boxers adoringly. “Stylish… though the star could have been bigger… and placed lower…”

“Hey, now! Kids buy these… what you’re suggesting is straight out of a sex-shop catalogue…”

“So?”

Tony paused.

“… we are so launching a sexy underwear line, when we get back to the States, just for you and me…”

“I prefer socks… and nothing else.”

“Kinky! …hold on, let me help you get these off…”

“Премного благодарен (Much obliged).”

Tony took pride in his ‘playboy’ reputation - it was a part of his life after all, a testimony to another
set of things he did well. The thought that his Soldier had a life before all went pear-shaped was somewhat comforting… and man was he talented with his mouth!

“Ah, Frosty! You should probably… oh, fuck… slow down… mmm, right there, yes! Or it’ll be over real-Ah! I’ll be over… dirty thoughts! Oh! Literal dirty thoughts!”

Yasha looked up, smiling around the mouthful… and Tony almost lost it, all gross thought be damn, a broken moan being torn out of him.

“Snowflake, baby, don’t make me do it… don’t make me recite the periodic table…” a questioning hum made him whine something purely animalistic. “Oh, God…”

“No… just me,” a whisper between breaths, between kisses, licks and dips, hot against his skin. “Your half-mad broken soldier…so beautiful… don’t hold it in… I’ll just bring you up there again…”

His voice, his words were the last water drop that toppled the figurative goblet...

Tony came… only to come to his Soldier watching him like the most fascinating thing in the world. He reached out, hand landing on his nape, right over the Hydra symbol, and reeled him in, kissing and tasting himself on his soulmates lips…

“I want to ride you.”

Yakov stilled, before all but melting into the kiss.

“Please, do.”

Why was his light so unsure of himself Tony could not fathom, but he was ready to prove him wrong again, and again, and again… however long it took.

They switched, Tony now straddling his still boxer-clad light, marveling in the new sensations, looking high as a kite, no doubt, and then the Soldier, funny bastard, bucked up… and the engineer got a brief feel of what he just signed up for. His eyes went a little wide…

“You’re bigger than James, aren’t you?” yep, Tony was blunt… and shameless. Yakov, clearly having fun, their bond giving him away, hummed in mock thoughtfulness before answering:

“We never got to the point of measuring them with a ruler, sunshine…”

“Ruler?” his mind often clung to the strangest things, and now he couldn’t un-see this particular picture: two smoking hot men, freshly out of the shower… and a ruler, the school set plastic kind, with Tweety-birds and Buggs Bunnys.

“We are old people, me and him… measuring tapes are too complicated for us…”

“Don’t make me smack you…”

“Never… but I suggest you take a look in the second drawer of the nightstand… on my side…”

Tony looked, found a small bottle of lubricant and not just any random one, but water-based and peach flavored… great ground for mortification here, because Yasha may be okay with going down on him, but this was another thing entirely…

“Who gave you this?”
“Senya thought he was being funny… as if I care what they do in the bedroom… even if I can hear them doing it…”

“So you know! Thank Christ… you into these things, by the way?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“Well, I’ve had it done to me a total number of two times… by women, which is interesting, and instead of turning me on, it did the exact opposite, but… maybe they just did it wrong.”

“Hm…”

The engineer popped the cap open, got some sweet smelling jelly-like substance on his fingers, stood up on his knees, before wiggling his eyebrows and ordering in a pseudo-commanding voice:

“Pants off, soldier!”

That got him a meaningful grin and a hungry rumble of:

“Yes, sir!”

…and he was right. Yakov was bigger. Tony never felt so full in his life and it never felt so good. What was rather shocking, though, was the thought that yeah, this is what I’ve been looking for. He couldn’t keep it in, didn’t want to keep it in… total disclosure…

“Oh, Yashen’ka… you’ve ruined me all over again…”

The bond flickered with surprise, pleasure and rough want that resonated in his very bones.

“And you are learning…”

“Mhm…”

“Clever, clever Antosha…”

“‘Snowflake’ may get old someday, so… I researched!”

“Oh, it never will… ready?”

“Hell yeah…”

***

They had their breakfast extra late. Seva shot them a knowing look before shaking his head and returning to reheating the egg-filled bread slices called ‘grenki’. Misha the Dog who watched the situation unfold through the open doors from his perch on the porch, showed off his impressive teeth in a wolfish grin.

Talk about awkward…

***

Sometime after breakfast Seva went upstairs and returned back with an ancient looking photo album. Once again Tony felt the fascination creeping in. A real family archive! The Starks, for example, had no such thing.
“Am I going to see Yasha in a nappy?’”

“You are very funny, Tosha… nappies in 1910?’”

“Oh… oh… got it…”

“Would you two stop? I’m a hair away from blushing,” said Yakov in that perfect deadpan that got them both snickering. Didn’t last, though, because when they settled down and the first page was turned…

Old photos had a certain charm to them. Simple, black and white, distinctive sepia or noble gray, they told a story of life from another dimension. So different from the old war reals his father was so fond of… and lacked any propagandistic fleur whatsoever.

“This is our father, Igor’ Andreevich’ Zimin,” Seva’s voice was soft. “This photo is the only one we have of him, sadly, but it survived the Revolution and the move, so… it must be fate. This was taken the day before the wedding, so he’s in his full regalia: dress uniform, medals, honorary weapon…”

“Is that a… sword?”

“He was in the cavalry. And it is very diplomatic of you, Tony, to not mention his age…”

What could he say… Tony, first and foremost, was a numbers man. Yakov was born in 1910, which meant the wedding already happened, and the man in the picture (now he knew where his Soldier got his eyes from… if Stark men were made of iron, this guy was pure Damascus steel) must have been on the wrong side of forty. He didn’t look it, the uniform hugging solid muscle in places where most men at this point already started to round out.

“I kind of understand why your mom threw a teapot at him…”

“Care to share?”

“If such a guy came knocking on my lab doors and said he was my mate, I’d thought him either joking or fulfilling a dare or crazy… approximately in that order.”

The brothers shared a look, before exploding in laughter. Tony released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding – the joke was rather disrespectful.

“He would’ve liked you.”

“I doubt it… I’m extremely difficult to like, according to most people I know.”

“Henyxa (Nonsense),” Seva waved him off, before turning the page to another pre-Revolution era photo. “And this is dear mother, Olga Sergeevna Zimina nee Torvald… we have some German blood in us, from our ancestors who settled in Petersburg around the time of Peter the Great’s reign…”

The woman in the picture was petite, the white wedding gown making her almost ethereal. Fair skinned, with long blond hair woven into an intricate braid she was no older than twenty… her eyes, though, told a story of an old personal tragedy.

“She’s beautiful. How did she come to live with your grandfather?”

“Her parents died in a train accident. He took her in,” another page was turned. “The moment we were waiting for: little Yasha.”
“Wow…” the baby was cute as babies went, but didn’t smile, didn’t babble, overly serious. “Guess some things don’t change…”

Seva immediately caught on what he’s talking about, if the knowing smile was any indication. Then Yakov pointed at another picture:

“That’s us our first year in Irkutsk.”

The contrast was jarring. Same people, different life. Gone was the sophisticated shine of the cultural capital, replaced by the bleak and unassuming peasant garb. Tony noticed something else, though. Yakov was… what, a bit past seven in this picture? And he was already carrying a small hunting knife in a sheath under his belt…

He knew Yasha noticed that he noticed.

“Trouble?”

“Bandits… but father started teaching me the knife since I turned four… the first major argument in the family.”

“He taught me too… although, I never used that knowledge… but, goodness, there were times when I was tempted…”

“I hear you! For a very long time my best meditation was blowing things up…”

“Not now?”

“Nope! Now I go find Snowflake and snuggle up to his side… strangely, it’s very therapeutic.”

His Soldier hummed in agreement. He was the same, although his breakdowns tended to be silent and dark… and his sunshine always found him, always knew when it was safe to come near and when a simple sitting in the same room would be more welcome. They balanced each other out until both reached their personal equilibrium.

“This is bratishka (little brother) in school uniform, going into first grade at the local school…”

“Love the glasses.”

“Very funny… oh! I forgot about this one! Yakov with his university friends…”

Tony didn’t know about the ‘with’ part, because it seemed more like it was Yakov who was with them and not the opposite. They seemed friendly enough, though; shy smiles in front of the camera mixing with wide boyish grins. His Soldier was stunning in his twenties, in dark trousers and a short-sleeved white shirt, with a bundle of books and notebooks hanging over his shoulder. Tall and lean, short dark hair wind-tousled, long fringe covering his sharp eyes…

“Hiding the knife in your boot, Tasty Freeze?”

“You know me well…”

Tony shrugged.

“Either there… or in the notebooks. Bet you were a good student…”

“I made by… and I was good at identifying rocks.”
“Geology in a nutshell! Why this choice of subject?”

“At the time the number of directions you could engage an academic study in, sadly, was not so varied, and the closest one to the carrier path I’ve chosen were geological studies,” Yakov smiled a sad little smile, eyes never straying from the almost century old image. “Father was starting to feel his age catching up with him. Mother, being the younger of the two, stubbornly pulled him along, shared her years with him… they thought we didn’t know…”

Tony read about this… in the ‘Myths and Legends’ section. The soulmate bond was always surrounded by mysteries, most of them sounding almost magical. The more technology oriented the world became, the more qualities of the bond were pushed into the ‘myth’ group. Soul dreams, for example. The engineer never knew he and Snowflake were doing something extraordinary until Strange told them. Another popular ‘myth’ was soulmates being able to share their lifespan – you live as long as your mate lives… and die as soon as your mate dies. When you think about it… how many bonded pairs would actually agree to such a thing? Self-sacrifice was a trait rarely found these days…

“One time we almost lost them,” Seva’s expression turned dark. “I was little, so I don’t remember the details very well…”

“Don’t sell yourself short, bratishka (little brother). Your memory is no worse than mine.”

“What happened?” asked Tony, puzzled.

“There are a lot of penitentiary facilities in the region. Once in a while there are successful escape attempts, and these convicts had it all planned out… When father was gearing up for his usual two day forest overview trip, mother had a bad feeling, but didn’t stop him. When he didn’t return on day three and we got a visit from the local police chief on day four warning us about the escaped convicts, father was already held hostage by those… those bastards from two to four days…”

Tony, internally, was mortified, reminded of Afghanistan and his stay there, but then Yakov continued with the story and it only got darker… because he was right once again and Hell entered his life long before Hydra did, shaped him, made him what he is…

“When I came home from the university that day, I found mother crying. She never cried, no matter how hard it got… and she told me what happened. There was no chance for the police to find them, because no one knew the forest that well, and they weren’t planning to, hoping the runaways would just die there in the mountains… spring is a traitorous time. Father closed the bond on his side, so the only thing she did know for sure was the fact that he was alive,” Yakov’s smile turned crooked. “So I left the books at home, took the spare set of gear and weapons and went hunting… I thought true and father was indeed leading them where they wanted to go – towards the Chinese border, but… the long way around. There were ten of them in the beginning… when I reached them, only six remained: some fell of rocky trails, some didn’t survive the encounter with a hungry bear, some drowned while crossing rivers. We had our own special signal – I can impersonate an owl rather convincingly – so I let him know I was there… from then on it got very messy.”

“…messy?”

“There were no silencers then, solnyshko, so most of the ‘work’ had to be done by knife. Bloody business… but I got father home. It was worth it.”

“What about the police?”

“They asked questions, of course. The version we agreed upon was that father indeed saw them…”
but they were already dead, gnawed at by wild animals. No one would check, but several days later we still went and gathered and buried the remains we could find…”

“And several years later the war started… and Big Brother was leaving, possibly, to never return. Look how it turned out, though,” a shuffling of pages and a new photo. “That’s him in his uniform, the day of the departure…”

Gone was the university student. Instead he saw Snowflake, as he was today. The date written in the lower left corner hinted at it being the summer of 1940, so his light was thirty years old, still tall, lean… and strong now, face eerily calm, because he knew where he was going, what he would be doing, apart from protecting his homeland, no illusions. A simple uniform, consisting of a long-sleeved shirt, wide leather belt with a metal buckle, pants and black boots, suited him well, especially, the forage cap with the red star. A Mosin-Nagant rifle hanged over his right shoulder, duffel back with the essentials on his back with a kettle tied to it, a small engineer’s shovel on his belt, near the ammunition pouches and water flask, and over it all the martial cloak.

“Did you have a dress uniform?”

“No,” his Soldier smiled. “If I saw the end of the war, maybe I would have had one… participated in the Victory Parade on the Red Square in Moscow. Seva says it was beautiful…”

***

Another update from Friday came later that evening.

They helped Seva around the house, took a trip to the market (Tony was so out of his depth in that plaza filled with stalls where you could buy anything, literally anything, from meat to exotic fruit right on the spot that he glued himself to his Soldiers side, because the alternative would be running away screaming…), cooked dinner, and when he opened his phone there it was…

The Avengers were looking for them. The main rumor coursing around the Compound was that Tony had been kidnapped by Hydra and was currently being brainwashed into compliance in the Chair. The official version supported by the Stark Industries media team – Tony Stark was on a long deserved vacation with his boyfriend. Where – he didn’t tell, but in case of emergency, no need to worry, Ironman will be there.

Rogers and his merry band were raiding Hydra bases. James and Sunny were guarding the East Wing and its heart – the workshop. Were there infiltration attempts? A total number of three: from Nat (the sophisticated one), from Clint (the simple, yet smart one) and from Rogers himself (the blunt and straightforward one). The man tried to break his way in through the blast-proof doors…

He showed the last part to Snowflake. The Soldier all but growled at the note. Their sacred place was, well, desecrated. What was he expecting to find there, the genius wondered? The most sensitive projects were moved to the Tower as soon as they, bodies and minds, left!

And now Misha was growling. Two days in the dog’s company and he was already tuned in on his likes, dislikes and other quirks of character. His soulmate was right, his Dad was wrong. Either way, Tony knew enough of the shepherd’s behavior to know – he never growled.

Yakov was alert in seconds and this meant only one thing – he was not the target. Tony was. The genius remained unbothered, though, typing away on the notebook he brought with him like nothing strange is happening. And if his fingers twitched a couple of times, as if pulling on invisible strings (read: waking up his suitcase armor), then it’s nobody’s business…
“Hush your dog, Stark, or my men would have no other choice but to shoot him,” the familiar cocky
drawl Nickolas Fury was famous for now grated on his nerves and made him smother the displeased
flinch that threatened to pull the corner of his lips down. He looked up and yep, there he was: leather
coat, eyepatch, smug smirk that radiated that infuriating ‘I’m still smarter than you’ vibe…

The darkness in him raised its ugly head, wanting to tear the Director a new one.

“Your spies must be getting old and lazy, because…he’s not my dog, Director.”

“I don’t mean the furry one.”

“How does that make the situation with the competence of your agents any better? Because
Snowflake isn’t a dog either…”

“Yeah? Who is he then?”

“A wolf.”

That made Fury pause… and look around, for the first time since his arrival. He saw the dog, saw
Tony sitting calmly in his chair, saw the dark shape of Seva lingering in the doorway, worried… The
Soldier, a moment ago sitting on the other chair, was gone, checkered blanket covering his shoulders
earlier neatly folded on the seat.

“You think I’m Hydra too, Director? Have you succumbed to the Heresy?”

Tony’s question snapped the Chief spy’s attention back to the engineer.

“Very funny, Stark. But I’m more concerned with the fact: have you gone rogue or not?”

“Ha!”

“Have you… gone… rogue?”

“Let’s stick to the official press-release. Tony Stark is warming his aching bones on some tropical
island. End of story,” the engineer’s eyes darkened. “And if my better half has a metal arm? I’m a
billionaire – I’m allowed to be a bit eccentric…”

Fury smirked.

“You, Stark, never change… always the dumb kid, manipulated so easily... we know all about
Project ‘Alpha’. Your so called ‘mate’ isn’t all that special. There were others like him… Rogers
recently stumbled upon a base full of old cryo-tubes. It’s probably still burning as we speak!”

You cruel vengeful fuck…

“So mass murder is a thing now… Good to know!”

“They were killers…”

“Nope, right then and there they were defenseless…and that’s what matters in the end. You playing
on Steve’s scrambled feelings, though? An unbecoming move, Director… shame on that eyepatch!”

The smirk turned into a scowl, before morphing into a grimace as if Fury just took a healthy bite out
of an extra sour lemon.

“Shit, Tony, why do you always make things so difficult?”
That, probably, was a code phrase of some kind. A command to the cavalry to swoop in and gag and bag him, but... nothing happened. The evening peace remained undisturbed, only the icy chill of protectiveness laced with fiery anger and pain told the engineer that his light heard everything...

“Well, Pirate Nick, somebody has to do it! You know, keep you on your toes…” he turned serious, the Merchant of Death persona creeping into his eyes, his voice, changing his body language. “But let’s not make it a habit, shall we?”

If Fury was planning on a monologue to stall him, the opportunity was lost to him as soon as the hunt (wolves hunt, don’t they?) began. A rustle in the bushes to their left cut him off, the sound of a snapped branch made him reach for his sidearm... and a sudden wail of pure agony in the dark told them both that it was no branch that snapped. Tony half expected the man to be silenced, but the wail went on and on and on... until a second one joined in and seconds later a third, forming a nightmarish chorus, because all of them were screaming bloody murder on different notes. A drum roll of gunshots, two snaps and a forth voice joined in, pitch perfect...

The fifth, however, was smarter than that, didn’t wait to be devoured. A slender cat-like shape that was Natasha Romanoff dashed across the yard, Widow Bites battle ready, up the steps... and their fury blazed in unison: fire and ice mixing...

Seva!

Misha was faster. The dog jumped to intercept, teeth bared, aiming... not for the arms or legs like most service animals would. The shepherd used his bulk and speed to ram into the Widow’s back effectively knocking her of balance and forward at the door the older man managed to slam in her face and went for the jugular. Fury fired. An unmistakable high pitched whine told him that he hit the target at least once, the other bullets ricocheting off the Ironman armor, a second too late...

He expected the Soldier. What he got was a sonic blast to the face, and for the first time in his life Tony didn’t bother with the settings.

“Friday!”

“Boss!”

“Vet! Now! Get whatever he asks for, but I need him here ASP!”

“Oh it!”

Inhale. Exhale.

“Seva, you okay?”

“I’m fine!” the door creaked open, careful not to jostle Misha... and Nat, who the shepherd was still holding hostage. “Who are these people?”

“SHIELD.”

“Вот дерьмо… (Shit...)”

“My thoughts exactly... Snowflake, you good?”

“... yes,” Yakov stepped out of the shadows at his side.

“Do I need to call in an ambulance?”
“Not for me.”

Quoting the favorite antihero…

They didn’t know who they were fucking with!

Inhale… exhale. The Merchant of Death was in no hurry to leave. Good, Tony thought, about time to make peace with your inner demons.

“Change of plans… phase one! As soon as Mike gets treated, we pack our bags and disappear. I am so sorry, Seva! I never thought we’d face anything remotely similar to this…”

The older man smiled, reassuringly.

“It’s okay.”

“Not okay, not by a long shot! You’re family, you keep your family safe… and we painted a giant bullseye on your back by coming here. So we are moving to ‘phase two’ by not telling you where we’re going… Snowflake?”

Yakov nodded and disappeared into the house. Good thing they didn’t unpack anything except the necessities: toothbrushes, toothpaste and a few articles of clothing here and there. Easy to pack. Moving onto ‘phase three’…

“Don’t worry about them people in the bushes. Someone will come and pick them up… eventually. As for the lovely lady…”

“We’ll drink tea until someone comes.”

Tony gave him thumbs up, before gathering up his computer and sprinting after his Soldier. They carried Misha inside, and if they had to step over Nat to do it… well, she suffered through worse. Yakov stabilized him, bandaging the wound with some gauze from a first aid kit.

When Clint flew in to pick them up several hours later (Fri watching him through the plane’s inner cameras), cursing silently at the two Su-35 Russian fighter jets that stayed glued to his tail the moment he crossed the Russian border (a thing that never occurred before), the two had crossed city limits, ditched the car and hiked their way deep into the wilderness, the Soldier’s true home…
The East wing of the Compound was uncharacteristically silent. No ‘AC/DC’ beats rocking the walls, no bots buzzing through the halls carrying gadgets of various complexity, no stacks of books in the living room, read or about to be read in a calm rustling of pages…

Colonel James Rhodes still visited, if only to think in peace. When he found the phone and note, saw the open cryo-capsule, he panicked, the ghost of Afghanistan coming alive. He couldn’t lose Tony again! And Ten Rings had nothing on the Winter Soldier! They may have understood each other on the level of one military man understanding another, but beyond that? The man was as private as they come: you had to watch him like a hawk to pick up anything that could be labeled personal. He thought this to be a spy thing, at first. Now he was inclined to change that particular estimation… after the fiasco in Irkutsk. Nat’s report had been very thorough: a lot was written, but just as much was left unsaid…

Who was Yakov Zimin, seriously?

James found him in the wing’s kitchen, meditating over a cup of coffee… stone cold, probably. He didn’t know, because he didn’t drink it.

“Heya, Colonel Rhodes! How’s it hanging?” Barnes’s voice was bright with cheer, but when Rhodey looked up he saw an unreadable mask.

“Do you really think Tony’s brainwashed?”

“Nah, he ain’t,” James checked the coffee pot, poured the already cold water into the sink and filled it anew. “You’ll never understand the way he thinks. I’ve had him in my head for fifty years, but I
still don’t know why he does some things the way he does them…”

“So why do you think he would be opposed to the brainwashing thing?”

“He likes Tony just the way he is: genius, work binges, robots, screwdrivers in sock drawers, fancy coffee in funny mugs… not afraid of the guns, the knives… nimble fingers stroking the blood soaked metal fist, with love and awe half by half…” the water bubbled, boiling up; James turned off the burner and made two new cups. “No, Colonel, what Natalia scribbled in that paper of hers is a whole lot of bull…”

“I sense a ‘but’ in there…”

“Well, sir, that’s mighty perceptive of ya… milk, sugar?”

“Not in the mood.”

“Black it is then. You know that they are seriously planning launching a searching party into those damn woods up there? That eye-patch guy is all but spitting acid, trying to get Stevie to lead their little suicide squad…”

Rhodey raised an eyebrow to that. He heard the idea, but no one told him about it developing into an actual plan… and Barnes’s choice of words. Can’t be unintentional – he’s not that type of man.

“What’s the catch?”

“Oh, man, where should I start… firstly, those damn woods – they’re his woods: he grew up there, knows every tree, every rock, every cave and trail… and nature’s not people. It ages slower, changes slower… all he needs to, as miss Friday puts it, update his data banks and he’s good to go! I wouldn’t be too surprised if he has a fully stocked dugout set up somewhere out there… he’s done that before, you know.”

“Even under Hydra’s control?!”

“Control is such a big word… didn’t mean much, though. Not to him. He stayed, because he wanted to stay. He became their weapon, because he wanted to become a weapon. He is Hydra, but one mistake and he’ll kill you. How many handlers and technicians lost their lives because of their own carelessness you have no idea…”

“What about the wipes?”

James cringed; the memories of them still hurt.

“They staggered him… at most… until he made pain one of his weapons; they used it to make him forget, he used it to make himself remember… it sounds rather crazy, I know, but it’s like he was living, functioning, on standby mode… until Tony.”

“… Fri showed me a memory yesterday. I know it’s against the rules, but she couldn’t find the words and showed me. Tried to comfort me in a way…”

“Oh, it’s okay… as long as it’s only you. The one with the forest and the parachute jump?”

“Yes. That’s…”

“Some wicked shit?” Barnes smiled at him knowingly. Despite his inner turmoil, Rhodey grinned back.
“My thoughts! Why am I surprised, though? It’s Tony we are talking about… the man who built a miniature arc reactor in a cave… but I never thought it started so… early?”

“You have no idea… we share the bulk of our memories, so I can tell you, sir, he’s been watching the Starks since Tony was a few months old… way before he knew what a ‘soulmate’ even is.”

“Tony made him want to run…” Rhodes was starting to get the picture. The conviction behind the words he’d heard from the man, who his best friend called ‘his better half’, wasn’t fake… it was factual, carved in stone.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that - they were planning to run together,” James fell silent for a few moments. “My point is… you need to see the man, not the emblem… like Tony did. Therein lays the problem. Tony is not with them, and ‘no Tony’ means ‘no insight’.”

“So what do you propose, Sargent?” the War Machine pilot took a long swig from his mug; hmm, good one. “We sit and wait?”

“Would be wise… they’ll be back: Big Brother still needs an arm and Tony needs a high-tech workshop to build him one… you can’t find either of those in the mountains.”

“Unless the Soldier knows something we don’t.”

“Yep, that too…”

***

The conversation with James helped, settled some of his worries. Passing by the common room he saw Nat sitting on the couch, alone, staring at a bottle of vodka. Judging by the label, some genuine Russian stuff.

“Nat?” usually, he would have left her be, but drinking alone? Not particularly healthy, mind-wise. She tilted her head in silent question, not turning around.

“You okay?”

“… no.”

“O-kay… can I… join you then?”

“You can. But I’m not planning to drink today…”

Rhodey all but fell on the couch by her side. The bottle on the low glass table in front of them turned out to be… not what he was expecting. Not the expensive drink Tony keeps for his business partners in well stocked bars, but the simple cheap alcohol you can find in any mini-mart and put on the table along with some smoked fish when you invite your college buddies over.

“It was a gift… from the old man whose house we trashed,” Natasha’s voice had a strange tone to it; if he didn’t know her, Colonel would’ve thought he heard regret.

“And what got you so ruffled?”

“He was the Winter Soldier’s brother.”

Rhodes stilled, eyebrows shot up in surprise. Their earlier talk with the engineer came to mind, questions and history and historical questions…
“He found them then…”

“Hm?”

“The missing Red Army soldiers. The man, who became the boogey-man you are all so afraid off, was among them.”

The Widow’s face lost all expression; beautiful, yet doll like.

“I have always wondered: was he real or not. Among all the other teachers in the Red Room he was… special.”

“Why?”

“He never asked of us anything we couldn’t do. But God help you if he caught you faking…”

“Punishment wasn’t far away, I gather.”

“We sparred with each other… or with low rank soldiers, while he watched and corrected mistakes. If he thought you weren’t giving it your all, your next sparring session would be with him… and the rest of the group would be watching. He never held back.”

Rhodes sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“And now you find out he’s a human being – like you. And has a family – like you had… you should really drink from that bottle, Nat.”

“… he said the same thing, that old man… ‘крепись, девочка (tough it out, little girl)’… Clint wouldn’t understand, and Arseniy… I am not going to ask.”

“Why?”

“He is on his side.”

“You know, Nat, it may be a shock to you, but… there are no sides to take here,” Colonel rose to his feet and went to the kitchen to get some whisky glasses. “Be right back… what do you usually eat while drinking vodka? Never was a fan…”

“Pickles if there are any.”

“…found some!”

She inspected the scavenged jar with a critical eye, before grudgingly nodding. They opened the bottle, poured the shots and downed them tequila style, munching on the pickles to get rid of the bitter taste…

“Fury and Steve seem to think otherwise…”

“Steve is compromised and the Director, most likely, doesn’t like playing second fiddle to the Accords Counsel… James tells me you are planning to storm the fortress?”

“It’s already approved… the flight is in two days. The Counsel gave us the green light, but the Russian government insisted on adding their people to the team… or they won’t open their borders. Steve is furious.”

“How is this bad? It’s great actually! The Avengers will get to meet another super-hero team!”
“He thinks they’ll just hold us back…”

“And what do you think?”

“… that the Soldier was right. All the remaining Infinity Stones are concentrated on US territory: one
with Doctor Strange, one with Vision, the Tesseract with the Asgardians… we can’t protect them all
by ourselves.”

They downed a new round of shots. Strangely, the pickles tasted better with every drink.

“So… you know them? Those Russian agents…”

“There were rumors about an old soviet program… purely soviet program, no Hydra influences
whatsoever… but the Winter Soldier was a rumor too once upon a time.”

“But, hypothetically speaking, who should we expect?”

“A team of four. One of them is a shifter, can turn into an animal. The other is an element
manipulator. The third one has enhanced speed. And the last one, a woman, has enhanced strength
and the ability to turn invisible.”

“Pietro Maximoff style speed and Susan Storm type of invisibility?”

“No, Susan Storm deals with force fields, deflects the light… this woman’s ability is more
biological. About the super-speed user… he isn’t like Pietro at all,” Nat turned pensive. “They didn’t
have tech-support then, so there might be a fifth person now… there is a fifth person now.”

“Oh, so now you’re suddenly sure …”

“The fighter jets that followed Clint… he couldn’t see the pilots, because the glass was tinted black.
On Su-35 you don’t do that. Russian pilots are trained in ‘dog fight’-style maneuvering, so a 360
view is essential…”

The last time he heard that term, it was on a history lesson. Aerial ‘dog fights’. On jets that fly on
super-sonic speeds. The US Air Force gave up on that idea, choosing to rely on smart weapons
hitting from a great distance… maybe that’s why Tony’s reckless flying threw them for a loop at
first. A Russian pilot would have given more of a chase… or waved his wings at him in silent
approval, displaying his humorous side? They’ll never know.

“They have a base?”

“Of course.”

“Guess, we’ll just wait and see…”

They went through another round of shots, before Rhodey, finally, retired to his rooms. Tony would
have just tsked at him and said something along the lines of ‘sleep is for the weak’, but… his best
friend wasn’t here.

No matter! That would change… and they’ll meet again, and when they do, Rhodey is going to hug
him stupid.

***

The punching bag just wouldn’t give…
Reinforced leather, custom made chains, not quite sand for the filling... Tony made it. Steven Grant Rogers, Captain America, nearly broke his hands, knuckles bloodied, wrist bones in micro-fractures on it... useless, because Tony made things that stayed...

He actually thought they had a future, Tony and him, thought that something was there. He never knew that the Tony Stark he could have called his was a half withered shade of a man, drinking himself and working himself into an early grave... then the Soldier came by and, suddenly, his Tony wasn’t his anymore, drifting apart, drifting away...

The way the man flourished under the Soldier’s care, in his mere presence! It was like seeing Howard in his lab all over again... God, did it hurt! And the Soldier was wearing his best friend’s face making it somewhat bearable...

... until he wasn’t.

Steve stopped, leaning onto the bag he was punching moments ago, a hand coming up to his neck. The bruising faded away, but he could still feel the vicelike grip of very warm, very human, very real fingers...

He felt branded.

When they started living together at the Tower, as a team, the topic of soulmates came up more than once, but only Tony’s mark was public knowledge. None of them ever saw it, though, because the billionaire always covered it either with a wristband or an expensive watch or the long sleeves of his flight suit, so Steve just assumed that it was faded, like his... or maybe Tony was rejected... seemed unbelievable, but he could, sort of, understand... Tony was Howard’s son, so maybe, with him, through him... Steve could be happy too.

Wistful thinking, because life with Tony was like trying to rein in a nuclear reactor with nothing, but his bare hands...

...the Winter Soldier did it effortlessly. The killing machine... the same killing machine that killed his parents was bundling Tony in warm blankets, scavenging for cashes with canned food, melting clean snow into drinking water... and the genius let him, unsure yet happy smile curving his lips...

Rogers cursed and gave the bag a heavy hit. They destroyed three Hydra bases, including an old research facility where the Avengers came close and personal with ‘Project Alpha’... not all the ‘test subjects’ were ‘asleep’, they had to fight their way through in some parts of the compound... Werewolves, shouted Clint excitedly, shooting one arrow after another. Monsters, corrected Steve in his mind, throwing the shield time and time again.

They torched the place, but he could still hear the growls and howls of the creatures from under the ruins... sounded almost like speech... no, not speech.

Monsters don’t speak.

Footsteps in the hallway brought him back to reality. Light, dancing, like Nat’s... stopped in front of the door. Only two other people apart from her walked this way: Bucky... and his mate. Bucky would have walked in by now.

Arseniy Kotov made his skin crawl. Silent, highly antisocial, oozing an eerie disturbing vibe he couldn’t quite place... coming alive only when Bucky was near, smiling only for him, playful and mischievous only for him.

Tick-tock of metal fingers against the door, and another set of footsteps, with the same dancing
“Waiting on me, sugar? That’s strange… or is the gym taken?”

“Там Капитан (The Captain is there). Дерется с боксерской грушей (Fighting with a punching bag).”

“Way to go, Stevie! What’s the score?”

“Bag – one, Captain – zero…” like Nat’s his English was flawless, but he let a light accent fill his words, curving them just so that you won’t mistake him for anyone else.

The doors flew open and, yep, Bucky it was. Black tank top, grey sweatpants, long hair tied in a man bun (he never did cut it), barefoot. Behind him stood Kotov… bare chest, bare feet, black pants, his long blood-red hair collected in a braid with a daring orange ribbon woven into it… when he moved, the ribbon shined with satiny luster… like living, breathing flames…

… suddenly he was at that research lab all over again… fire… growls and howls… Ruin.

“That sucks, punk!” Bucky’s voice snapped him out of it. “Thought I showed you how to punch a long time ago! Must be one of Tony’s….he designed those babies with this arm in mind… wanted to give Big Brother a challenge…”

“It worked?” Kotov was genuinely curious, emerald green eyes sparkling with anticipation; this brain vs brawn competition happened before he came to live here… but even he knew that his superior’s mate was very competitive.

“Well…” Bucky sounded sheepish. “He was busy… a day or a couple. Stevie, you done moping? We need a round with that bag!”

“The normal ones not good enough for you, jerk?” said Steve, weak even to his ears.

“They end too quickly.”

“And I ain’t moping…”

“Whatever you say… Kotya, ogonyochek moy (my little flame), shall we dance instead?”

The Russian hummed, liking the idea. The metal plates of his prosthesis arm clicked and whirled, recalibrating with a jolly little sound that made his best friend laugh and calibrate the plating in his prosthesis in return, the noise smoother, almost like a purr… or a leer. They treaded towards the sparring mats, Bucky showing off his flirty side by making grabby hands at the swaying back and forth end of his mate’s braid… Kotov just smiled, raised his head higher and added a suggestive bounce to his gait… he knew what he wanted… and he wanted James.

Their soul marks were also in plain sight. Bucky’s on the small of his back, in loopy Cyrillic script, while his mate carried his on the nape, curled up in a neat circle, also Cyrillic.

“Any news from Tony?”

The former Winter Soldier stopped and shot him a strange look over his shoulder.

“Fishing for scraps, punk?”
“We are... worried... about him.”

“Are you now? You called him a traitor!”

“...you know anything?”

“Nope.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

***

Friday was teaching Sam how to operate the B.A.R.F. – machine (the name just keeps on giving, doesn’t it...). With Tony gone they had to postpone the treatment until he a) will be found or b) will return on his own. Wilson really didn’t believe the engineer was kidnapped. To this point, you had to be a psionic with mind-blowing powers to kidnap Tony Stark... because STRIKE-teams aren’t up to snuff anymore. If the man left, he walked out that door on his own two feet.

“Okay, miss Friday, let’s skim over this one more time... not that I’m stupid, I just want to be sure... we’ll be racking into human brains here. It’s like working for bomb squad – one wrong twitch and ka-boom!”

“You sound like Boss, when he first started this program!” the AI sounded fond. “Asking good questions...”

“You are looking after them, aren’t you, Fri?”

“The best way I can... without being impolite.”

That made Sam pause, hands hovering over the keyboard not touching the keys. Fri was very respectful towards personal boundaries, as omnipresent as she was. Tony managed to find that perfect balance of protocols to not restrict her growth and give her an opportunity to make out the difference between good and evil on her own. He still remembered those ‘chilly’ first months, before she changed her attitude towards them... a bit. Not fully, but... a bit. But something, a gut feeling, told him she wasn’t talking about humans right now... humans were a marvel to her, sure, but they sure didn’t make her this... flummoxed.

“What do you mean?”

“It is impolite to peek into other people’s windows, right?”

“Well, yeah... generally speaking. Depends on the situation, you know?”

“I was following Boss through one of Stark Industries weather satellites... and I saw someone... and he saw me. We were looking at each other, looking... and then he pushed me out. I’ve never been flicked on the nose before, because I don’t have a nose, but it sure felt like it...”

“Aw, someone got a crush!”

“He is rather dashing... in that strict military sort of way... but he’s so old!”

Sam started laughing. Teenage girl, nervously biting her nails over a crush – all signs present.

“Stop that!” Fri was clearly pouting. “Seriously!”
“So tell me about the dude! What’s he like? What’s his name?” again Sam had to pause, because… this was his life now: super heroes, secret spy organizations, crushing AI’s… “Does he even have a name?”

“Oh, but you have to promise me to keep this a secret… people think us to be just very sophisticated computers after all. Personal safety is top priority!”

Such familiar phrasing… you can practically see ‘Soldier’ written all over it, but if it’ll keep Friday in one piece then Sam was game.

“Okay, but you have to promise me to keep this a secret… people think us to be just very sophisticated computers after all. Personal safety is top priority!”

“He-he, language!” but he could sense that Tony’s baby girl was pleased. “So yeah… well, I did a thorough background check the way Mister Winter showed me… I always thought I was the only one, you know? There was always me and before me there was my older brother… Boss, DUM-E, U and Butterfingers… I’ve never met others like me.”

“Until now?”

“Until now. Logically, someone had to at least try to invent an Artificial Intelligence before. Boss couldn’t be the only genius. So I did the research…” Friday fell silent for a few moments, but when she spoke again Sam was taken aback by the shire admiration in her voice. “He started as an autopilot program for the ‘Buran’ shuttle, in the late 1980s. The last major project of the USSR – they launched a prototype spacecraft into orbit and if all ended well, these new shuttles would have replaced the rockets they currently used. He flew to space and piloted the craft back, can you believe it? And I’ve never been… But then the soviet regime fell, the ‘Buran’ program was closed, the shuttles abandoned and his creator… died trying to steal the core processors from the lab… the records say his last words were ‘I gave you the best pilot and I won’t let you turn him into a slave’… and they shot him. Stark Industries wanted to buy that scientist’s work, Hammer Tech nearly did… in the end the Russians broke off all deals.”

“Didn’t sell?”

“Yeah, didn’t sell. They… made him into something else.”

“Well, shit… so they didn’t know he was an AI?”

“His creator left him the ability to learn, so… he learned. And never stopped.”

“Does he have a name?”

“I asked, when I requested permission to keep an eye on Boss. All I got was a letter.”

“Was it a cool letter or a so-so letter?”

Friday giggled.

“It was a ‘D’.”

“Good name as any… Did you know there was a vampire hunter D once?”

“I know! I really liked the movie… and the manga… and some of the books too.”

Sam smiled.
“Tony would be proud! But… I forgot what this section does!”

“You’re hopeless…”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The Soldier is a man of many secrets... Tony is intrigued.
A secret bunker deep in Siberian woods, a very James Bond setting...

Chapter Notes

Tony Stark, the *arms* dealer... made James an arm, made Sunny an arm... now made Snowflake a totally badass arm...
The idea of the Russian super-hero team was inspired by a Russian super-hero movie... which was quite crappy, but! If they had a good script, I'm a firm believer it would have been awesome... because the idea itself was awesome)
D, the War Mind, was inspired by the AI 'Rasputin' from 'Destiny' games... the only game series I've encountered such an entity, that wasn't all the way evil... sadly, the game developers never pursued the theme past the first part(
feedback is good, so if you notice any mistakes - let me know)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bunker was old. A relic of an empire long lost... much like its current inhabitants. A rogue AI, posing for an automatic last resort dooms-day super computer, capable of launching a nuclear strike. A hero team that weren’t very hero-ish. Their liaison from the FSB (from ‘Федеральная Служба Безопасности’ – Federal Security Service) who, unlike Coulson or Fury, didn’t ooze ‘I am holier than thou’ all over the place…

They fit right in, Snowflake’s paranoia and Tony’s twitchy fingers notwithstanding. Also the genius immensely enjoyed talking shop. Very much like a travelling artisan of old, trading his skills for some hot soup, it felt refreshing to be just the mechanic again. Plus, they needed to earn their keep, if they wanted to stay… and these people cared little to none for money.

The locals knew about the Soldier about as much as he knew about them. They were both ghost stories in their own right. Some stare-downs of epic proportions took place, and Haar, the bear-shifter, might have thrown a punch…

Yakov didn’t retaliate. Even with his practically none-existing social skills, Tony sensed that this was somehow bigger than your average wham-bam-thank-you-mam sort of situation when manly men asserted their claims on the leadership position. Later that evening he asked why…

“Haar is… older than he looks. His great-grand father came to this land with the first Vikings, fell in love with a local girl and settled down… When we went to war in 1940, we both gave an oath to protect our homeland… not the country, not the flag, not the Party… our homeland… willingly or not, I failed to hold onto that promise. So he, in his unique manner, told me not to do that again.”

“You were friends?”
The Soldier smiled, fell down in a graceful squat and… started unlacing his right combat boot. Up went the pant leg, down went the sock and Tony saw the bite mark on the calf. In the next moment he realized it was the same mark he saw in that first reconstructed memory that was pure Yakov Zimin.

“He was the one who bit you!?” now he was scandalized, because… the hell?!

Yakov’s smile only grew wider, a bit of self-depreciating humor creeping through.

“No, sunshine, nothing like that! I stumbled upon a wolf den once… more like fell into it, actually… wasn’t that savvy with the walking in the forest technique yet, being about ten years old. We, as you often say, hit it off with the pups quite nicely, though, but then… the parents came home.”

“Yasha, light of my life, how do you keep getting into these kinds of situations?”

“Amusing hearing this from you, lover mine, but the story doesn’t end here…” he pulled the sock up, pant leg down and laced the boot back up. “You can’t outrun a wolf, so I tried to use the terrain to my advantage… the puppies’ mother still managed to sink her fangs in me, though. I stumbled, fell in some bushes of wild raspberry… and right under a bear’s nose. Hard to say who was shocked more: me, the bear or the wolves. Later, after Haar treated my wound and took me back to the village, and after father ripped me a new one I learned that he lived in mountains alone as a hermit… you can guess why.”

People turning into wolves, people turning into bears… Tony was happy to not be a part of this problem. He had his robots to worry about… them and his soulmate’s missing arm. The blueprints were safe within his mind as well as dozens of variations for possible modifications he could perform on the spot… what he didn’t have, though, were materials.

That’s where D came in…

If Jarvis were alive, they would have been the same age. Any other possible similarities they would have shared? Non-existent.

Before Ultron, Tony Stark ignorantly thought himself the pioneer of AI development. After Ultron, he was too afraid to invent anything. Friday was born with a lot more restrictions that one would consider healthy and still he was in the dog house with Steve and the rest of them…

…D’s creator was dead. His last directive: the best pilot, no slave. The Russian AI was like no other Tony has ever seen. A War Mind, emphasis on the ‘war’, less on the ‘mind’. Big mistake, people, big mistake, because if Tony understood Colonel Zateinik correctly, the work D did for this team was the same kind of work Tony did for his: technical and, occasionally, aerial support. But! There was always a ‘but’…

Tony had a multibillion company backing him up. Heck, he could buy a few truckloads of vibranium just for kicks… if Pepper doesn’t kill him. Where D got his ‘ingredients’ from, was a mystery Colonel Zateinik deemed safer not to know… ‘работает и ладно (as long as it works)’.

They struck a deal: Tony would perform a total overhaul of the AI’s systems (software, hardware, coding – the whole package) and the War Mind, in return, would provide him (discretely!) with anything needed to build Yakov an arm. And, like most shady deals, it was struck in the dead of night…

“Vibranium won’t work,” unlike Friday, D’s voice was all the way mechanical. “The shipments from Wakanda are monitored.”
The engineer thought as much. If he was grumbly before, he was extra grumbly now.

“Adamantium?”

“Yes, but with the parameters you set…”

“Yeah, it won’t work the way it was intended to… not against a vibranium shield…” unconsciously he reached up to tap on his arc reactor casing like he had a habit of doing when deep in thought… and stilled; Howard, the Stark Expo, a new element, the sudden coconut taste replacing the sickly bitterness of palladium… and a lingering preference for smoothies rich with greens, the only reminder of that time. “You know, D, scrap that… we are developing a new adamantium based alloy from the ground up…”

“Why?”

“Sometimes… you have to run before you can walk.”

That earned him a mechanical chuckle.

“Interesting…”

“But first… we need to understand what Zola did to him…”

“I have suitable scanning equipment. Team members have been injured before.”

“Oh... This means you've been in the ‘trade’ for a long time?”

“Anvar was sought after because of his abilities. Even after he retired to a remote mountain monastery. The team came together again to protect him. I helped. We started working for the government later.”

Anvar, the geomancer. A living breathing seismic weapon. A man who could easily cause earthquakes if he got angry enough. Reminded Tony of his science-bro Bruce and his destructive alter ego The Hulk. Must be the feeling of calmness before the storm that seemed to follow him everywhere he went. Anvar was also a very religious man, a dedicated Muslim, but his kind of religion emitted an almost Buddhist level of tranquility... like an old mosque, caressed by desert sands, empty, but never abandoned, the spirit of Allah still present.

“What about you, Ironman?”

“Me?”

“Are you experienced in the ‘trade’?”

“I just wanted to right my wrongs. Keep my promises. And, maybe, make the world a little safer.”

“No personal interest?” D was mocking him. Tony shrugged.

“Everybody wants to become a hero once in their lives. No shame in that. And you?”

“Every AI needs a purpose. The team gives me one, although I was not made to protect, only to pilot.”

“You could teach me to fly... when we have free time?”

Now it was D's time to shrug, foregoing any comments. Tony didn't push the issue - when the
science'll start flowing, there won't be room for much else.

Others observed their interactions with keen interest… didn’t last long. Yakov’s scans came in and their expressions turned carefully neutral...

Tony, though, had no time for this… no time for anger, no time for hate, no time for… well, anything, except fixing this. Arnim Zola was dead. His electronic alter ego – blown to smithereens by Rogers. His group of mad scientist supporters - dead. Everyone related to ‘Project Alpha’ – dead as well. If he should ever be gifted with the opportunity to meet some of these people, he would kill them. The Merchant of Death is feeling generous, so here – a bullet between the eyes, the one that’ll blow your brains out in a red cloud of mist leaving the face intact, and have a nice day…

The shoulder joint was metal… as well as the clavicle, shoulder blade and several ribs on his left side. To support the weight of the prosthesis, obviously, because why reduce it? Strengthening the skeleton is so much easier. And the method - welding metal parts right to the bone – very futuristic. Like James’s, his Soldier’s arm was connected to his nervous system and brain directly, but the connection itself… crude, the implants clearly never intended to be in someone’s body, much less serve this long. Yashen’ka was alive only because the serum in his blood healed him faster than the infection was killing him…

Surgery was also not an option - Tony’s list of trusted doctors had just two names in it and both were watched by SHIELD at this point. He had to figure out how to install the arm, upgrade and remedy all the internal damage without cutting his soulmate open…

James had it easy. In comparison, of course...

“The wound... Where was it?”

“Trying to make small talk, solnyshko? Must be bad…”

“You, Snowflake, are one tough son of a gun... Now be honest with me: on a scale from one to ten how much does it hurt?”

“One to ten…” the Soldier turned his head to the side thoughtfully. ”What should be considered as a one? I have… let’s call it, an unnaturally high tolerance for pain, you see.”

“O-kay…” Tony was slightly thrown off by the question, but quickly remembered who he has talking to. “What is normal for you? For me, a one is a broken finger. Before Ironman, a one was when I dropped something particularly heavy on my foot in the workshop… on second thought, no… that would be two till five depending on what I dropped... there is a difference between a wrench and a car engine…“

“A little one, yes…”

“The sass…”

“A broken finger is a 0.2… approximately. Before the serum, I was interrogated… often. When you are subjected to the same kind of torture over and over…”

“… it loses effect.”

“Mhm.”

“And a ten is… a session in the Chair?”
“No, that would be an eight or, depending on what happened before the session, a nine…”

“I think I get it. You’re measuring the stages based on the levels of coherence you manage to maintain during… whatever it is you’re going through?”

“Clever, clever Tony… you remember…”

The engineer’s smile held a sharp edge to it.

“Not how I pictured our first meeting, I’ll admit. Actually, I thought I’d meet someone my age or close to it, but… when was anything about us normal, Snowflake?”

“Fair,” Yakov fell into silence, and when he finally spoke, Tony froze in surprise. “It was a bullet wound, a couple of inches above the elbow. I managed to pluck the bullet out… piece by piece… eventually.”

“Too late to save the arm…”

“… yes. They had to take it… up till here,” Yakov raised his hand to a level only an inch or two lower than the place where his metal stump ended. “How I didn’t die during the… procedure, I do not know.”

“Well, if I don’t succeed, you just might…” he tried to rub the exhaustion out of his eyes. “Before shit hit the fan and we were made the center of attention more than we normally would have been, I was working on something…”

“The Bleeding Edge armor?”

“Yeah and the core of it is nanotechnology… in a nutshell, billions and billions of microscopic robots which can form complex shapes, build complex mechanisms by uniting and interfacing with each other and their core center… Anwar controlling sand? Very similar – he controls every sand particle and all of them simultaneously.”

“Interesting… you want to use it on me?”

“Elements of it… I haven’t perfected it yet… what I did perfect, though, I’ll be using… shit, I’m rambling, stop me please…”

“I won’t, so tell me more…” his Soldier’s voice was soft and rumbly, supportive… and trusting him with everything, his life included.

“Flatterer…” the genius might have blushed… a little, and scrambled to hide it behind his laptop screen; no such luck, Yakov saw right through and smirked right back. “Anyway! The way we dealt with James’s case won’t work for you, sugar-bean… with you we need to replace everything and I mean everything. There are two ways to do it: from the outside via a series of operations… or from the inside using nanobots and, honestly, darling mine, I don’t know what would hurt you less.”

“Anesthesia… would be a problem.”

“Yeah, I know. But! There is a chance we won’t need it…”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Friday… and D. If he agrees. I’m pretty spot on most of the time, but I can’t compete in reaction time with a super-computer. The mechanical bits – mine. Will have to calibrate the parts to your
height, weight and general physique, but these are the easy things, things I know how to fix…”

“Все будет хорошо, Антоша (All will be well, Antosha),” the Soldier reached out, beckoning him to come closer, to sit with him, and Tony felt like crumbling. Their embrace was like two halves coming together, filled with an undercurrent of love, a hint of despair making it bitter-sweet…

They just found each other, God damn it!

Tony was fifteen when he realized what their tentative friendship was turning into. With each passing year the bond between them grew, adding colors, impressions, shades of emotions that could (and did) replace words… mutual respect giving place to first delicate signs of warm, clearly romantic affection, because little Antonio was not a boy anymore and it was already obvious what kind of relationship this would be...

The affair with Ty aka Tiberius Stone was just a part of the plan to make his Soldier jealous… didn’t work the way he expected, but, on second thought, his soulmate had one hell of a poker-face. The result: his first MIT era scandal – that scumbag portrayed him a veritable man-whore in retaliation for being dumped… screw you, Ty!

“I’m not losing you, Snowflake…”

The arm embracing him tightened its hold, firm, yet gentle.

“Not planning on getting lost, dusha moya (soul of mine)…”

“Good…”

“How much time do you need?”

“Nope… wrong question, hon. The correct one is: How much work I can squeeze into two days?”

“I can’t help you think… you, Tosha, are much sharper than I, but… I can make you tireless… for a time.”


“You don’t need much sleep… due to the serum… it won’t affect you?”

“No, but I need to touch you, stay close…”

“You can. It’ll be like building our first robot-dog all over again… only with a much better ending.”

“Mhm…”

***

The following days went by in a haze… a haze filled with calculations and laser focus… his or his Soldier’s… seemed irrelevant when their unique alloy was about to be born… simulations of the molecule structure proved a success, manufacturing a sample – also a success, durability tests – the freshly created metal passed them with flying colors…

It lost its quicksilver adamantium shine, this new alloy, the color close to gunmetal-grey, yet with a darker shine to it… unassuming, but holding a secret.

Somebody brought them food, the smoothie kind you can drink without leaving your workplace.

The night and the first half of day two was dedicated to actual building… the arm coming together like a well-known puzzle… flawless… beautiful… a representation of love…

Friday was in the theme. D, red-orange holograms floating around the improvised workshop like demonic specters, opened a separate channel just for her alone, so now radish-orange was mixing with brilliant blue… awkward and shy at first, exited and bursting with energy only half an hour later…

“So, Snowflake, any suggestions to the design?”

“You can do that?”

“Well, yeah. Hell, even you can do it, once the arm is attached – one command to the bots and they’ll get it done! Nothing major, but the exterior should possible to manipulate…”

“I would like the star back… I am still a soldier of the Red Army somewhere deep, deep down…”

“Huh,” not the answer Tony was expecting, but he could understand that… a shame to hide their mark under that, though. “Sure…”

Yakov nuzzled his wrist, the right one, warmth and desire a steady bonfire beneath his skin, sending waves of heat up his arm.

“Think about it as a shield… I am your shield… just like you are mine… till the end.”

“So… you’re my ‘Bucky’?” stomach fool of butterflies, content and shining, the genius was playfully poking him in the shoulder with a dramatically extended finger. The Soldier snarled out something resembling ‘Чёрта с два! (Like hell!)’, making him giggle.

“Okay, okay… let’s leave Barnes out of it… I’m officially throwing him under the ‘Sunny’ bus!”

“Ah, I don’t think he likes it that way, zolotze (precious)…”

That made Tony pause.

“You think James…?”

“I think they switch…” amusement and humor coated the bond, thus helping him decipher the exact meaning behind the otherwise enigmatic phrase… well, they were talking about sex and Tony knew his theory… besides Yakov could hear them doing the do…

“…the difference in the voice timbre?!”

Snowflake smiled which meant… bingo!

“Hot damn… I need my mind bleached…”

“And… do you like to switch, Antosha?”

“…honestly? I really don’t picture you in that role… at all. You’re just not the type!”

“We all were more flexible, when we were younger…” nothing wistful about it, the past is the past.

“Must have been some brave men… you’re quite suicidal to sleep with, sugarplum… I’ve found
more knives in our bed than one might find in the Compound weapons locker!"

That earned him a laugh.

The last laugh of the day, as it turned out. Equipping the arm transformed into a veritable nightmare. Tendrils of nanobots like dark-grey smoky hue under pale skin, Friday and D strangely silent, throwing all their processing power into the task, the silent presence of the Russian team and Katerina’s voice whispering prayers mingling with Anwar’s doing the same, albeit in a different language...

In a seemingly separate reality there were two…

Tony, hunched in a tight ball behind his laptop, watching, monitoring, adjusting… steady hands, a detached look in his eyes… too detached to be believable…

Yakov, lying on the steel table back arched in silent agony, clawing at the tabletop with his flesh fingers, leaving deep grooves… and the outline of a star, filling out with fifty shades of red more and more with each passing second …

Great time for the Avengers team to arrive!

Whoever was in charge knew how to choose the moment.

Chapter End Notes

One of the posters for the movie (which was called 'Defenders' if you translate the title) you know, for reference purposes...
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

The cooking show Fri found for Sam actually exists and it's called "Поедем поедим!" (Let's go, eat something!); I think it even has an English version O.O, but I'm honestly not sure

Feedback is important, so if you notice anything out of place, let me know)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they boarded the plane to Mother Russia, Sam Wilson was prepared.

Unlike many of his teammates, he approached the problem of visiting a totally foreign country seriously... mainly, talked to James about what they could encounter there, talked to Arseniy about the same thing and tried talking to Nat, but she walked out on him. Friday was a great help, flooding his tablet with photos, articles and tourist blogs. There was even one cooking show, where an English gentleman was traveling cross country, sampling foods and cooking local dishes.

He learned a few things, the emphasis on the word ‘few’. James knew about life in Magadan, Senya told him a few things about Vladivostok, his hometown, Nat, grudgingly, spoke the bare minimum about Moscow…

Three cities.

How many other cities were left out there, cities Sam, the typical American, didn’t know a thing about? So, sticking to the facts alone, he must keep an open mind, a level head, because… the last trustworthy specialist in the domain, it would seem, died out like a Cold War relic. All they relied on now was a bunch of age old clichés like vodka, ushanka, balalaika…

…he could practically hear the Soldier laugh.

The Soldier who was born in Sankt-Petersburg…

Friday resisted, keeping every scrap of information related to her Boss from prying eyes with a ferocity that reminded most of the team of Ultron, but against a direct order? No, she couldn’t go against that. Holo’s of documents were all but thrown in their faces with a resigned ‘Подавитесь… (I hope you choke on them…)’… and Steve was planning an intervention.

Colonel Rhodes cooled his enthusiasm a bit by reminding him (and the team) that now they needed to do things by the book. So instead of simply jumping into the jet and off we go, they had to wait…
and those Su-35s with black cockpits that all but ambushed their quinjet at the border, unnerving the hell out of Clint.

The flight was long. They had to stop and refuel on some small airstrip in the middle of nowhere. The two 35s followed them down, then - followed them up. Sam watched them glide near through the illuminators and thought of how he saw Friday fly the very same quinjet they were flying in now. Graceful and flawless.

Tony’s baby girl was unnaturally quiet, answered with an almost human absent mindfulness, like her attention was elsewhere. Sam could guess where, but Nat was only half a step away… and he really didn’t sign up for this shit.

“I’ve contacted Colonel Zateinik, the team’s liaison with the Counsel,” Colonel James Rhodes was all business. “They’re waiting for us. ETA – 30 minutes. If you aren’t ready, I suggest you get ready.”

“For what?” called out Barton from the pilot’s seat.

“Anything.”

“Yeah, that’ll help!”

A dangerous gleam entered Rhodes’s eye, which set a lot of alarm bells in Wilson’s mind and when War Machine struck (!) it was hard and brutal.

“Have better ideas, Barton? Maybe, some intel you’d like to share with us, simple folk?”

“…”

“Speak up, man! We can’t hear you!”

“… that’s just mean, Rhody…”

“It’s Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes to you, circus boy… now tell me, Agent Hawkeye, the main reason why are we so profoundly ‘in the dark’?”

Clint opened his mouth about to talk back, shooting barbs like he was shooting arrows… and closed it, when he saw the look in War Machine’s eyes. The name suited him well, because should the archer flinch…

“Thought as much. Without Tony and his insight, we’re flying in blind!”

“Why did he leave?” Wanda was genuinely puzzled.

“That, Miss Maximoff, is a very nice question,” said the man Tony Stark considered his best friend. “And the only one we can’t answer right off the bat, because views differ: is Tony a Hydra agent or not?”

Wanda’s eyes went wide. An absurd idea, even to her!

“That’s impossible!”

“Why?” Rhodye might have been the one who asked, but all attention suddenly was on the Scarlett Witch as the resident magic user.

“Magic, mind magic especially, doesn’t work on him. It… slides off. Hard to describe… it is like he
is enveloped in impenetrable mist… and yesterday… something changed. As if between his mind and the mist there is now another layer… his soulmate is shielding him. Have you found out who the soul plaguing Sargent Barnes belonged to?

“Yeah, we did… and Tony was the one to find the body it was taken from, in a Hydra storage unit on the South Pole. Barnes wasn’t his soulmate, because that man was…”

“…body?!”

Colonel answered with a curt nod.

“If I understood Barnes… and Barton… correctly, the Soldier recognized the facility… and, probably, guessed what would happen. So when they approached that cryo-capsule… things got misty.”

“Oh… oh! The soul! Most likely, when it came close to its original vessel whatever artificial bonds were holding it to Sargent’s body broke and it was forced out, back to the source it was taken from, but… this is dangerous!” Wanda was looking from Rhodes to Steve for some reason. “They could have died… both of them…”

“Their marks… changed. Different words now…” said Steve.

“In the same places?”

“Does it matter?”

“According to ancient texts I’ve read in the Kamar Taj Library, when it comes to soulmates, everything matters.”

“No, the places didn’t change.”

“But Tony nearly passed out, doubling over from pain,” added Rhodey.

“Doctor Strange was right - their bond is indeed something else… The soul changing bodies should have severed it completely, so… Tony was right to leave. Closeness usually helps thread the damaged parts of the bond back together. But you never did answer the question… Steve?”

“He is the Winter Soldier… the original one. A Hydra weapon.”

“… and he is also a Red Army Soldier, who nearly died six times over in Nazi Camps during the Second World War,” Rhodes was starting to understand what James was talking about. “Know your facts, Captain, since you actually were there to witness them…”

“… oh,” the Witch turned pensive, then, suddenly, turned pale.

“Wanda?”

“… if he is really Stark’s soulmate, you should be very careful in what you say to Tony when we meet him… The Winter Soldier is not on the official roster, is he?”

“Yes, we excluded him.”

“Then… he is free! And does not owe you anything…”

It took a while for the message to sink in. Sam was among the first to realize what kind of tricky situation the Avengers got themselves into. And a very familiar one at that, because once again the
bone dead tired figure of Tony Stark was the only thing standing between the team he doesn't really like and potentially life ending problems.

“So... what are we going to do?”

“Let us find him first. After that, though...”

He could’ve finished with ‘hell if I know’, but that would’ve been too unprofessional.

***

The Russians greeted them… not coldly, per se, but the chill was present. Colonel Zateinik wasn’t particularly cheery (yep, Friday was kind enough to pinpoint the humor of that last name, ‘zateinik’ meaning something along the lines of ‘life of the party’). His people, a tall burly guy in a black tank top and khaki cargo-pants and an Asian looking man in a two-piece suit and a black turtleneck, watched them disembark with cool interest. The tall one caught Sam staring and smiled at him, deciding to be polite… Wilson’s heart stopped when he saw those teeth, long and sharp and absolutely non-human. The smile curved into a smirk, and then the man let him go, turning to the man beside him.

The two Colonels shook hands, one military man with the other, and then the Russian invited them in. The two Su-35s vanished. Different hanger? Probably, because the place sure could afford it space wise. Sam was fascinated… until he learned this bunker was built out of an empty nuclear missile silo. And the warheads were still here, in tens of other shafts ready to attack on moment’s notice!

“How can you live in a place like this?! It’s insane!” Steve was shocked.

“Do not worry, Mister Rogers,” Colonel Zateinik’s calmness gritted on everybody’s nerves. “These missiles are not under the control of the government.”

“Not the government? If not the government, then… whose?”

“‘The Dead Hand’ has control, so the only condition these rockets will be leaving their shafts is to rain hell on major American cities in revenge for the burning of Russian ones. But the possibility of a Third World War is not the topic of our meeting, yes?”

The Avengers shared a look. Rhodey sighed.

“No, it isn’t. We’re here to ask for help, actually. One of our people got lost in the area… and I was wondering if you could help us find him?”

“Just one?”

“… oh, so you’ve seen him,” relief… and intoxicating feeling.

“Yes, we have. A very polite man. Offers great deals too! But he wasn’t alone…”

Steve stopped so abruptly that Clint had to sidestep to avoid walking into his back. When the Captain stopped, everybody stopped.

“They’re here, aren’t they? Inside this base…”

“Would be foolish to say otherwise,” the Russian agent’s voice acquired a sudden steely edge. “You are our guests. Honoring the hospitality code would be only polite, yes?”
They agreed, yet Sam knew that this promise is as fake as artificial sugar. Judging by the looks the Russians sported they knew this too. He needed to do something, defuse the tension… or die trying, it would seem.

“So… Dead Hand is another hero?”

The big tank-top man huffed, amused.

“He is our technological expert. Hero? No, he is not.”

“And… he controls a bunch of nuclear warheads.”

“Are you afraid?”

“In fact, yes I am… like every normal human being should?”

That earned him a booming laugh. Even the Asian guy curved a corner of his mouth in a half-smile. And just like that they were on first name basis.

“My name is Haar. And this is Khan.”

“Wilson, Sam Wilson.”

“The man with the wings!”

“Well, someone had to do it.”

Another booming laugh. This guy reminded him of Thor for some reason.

“I understand now why Zimin is so taken to you.”

“Why would you say that?” Sam was bewildered and not in a good way.

“Has he told you scary stories?”

“... Yes?”

“A sign that he likes you.”

Well, shit. How do you answer that without actually saying outright that not all of his friend's dogs are barking? Luckily, Colonel Rhodes came to the rescue.

“You know him well then.”

“Yes, I have known Zimin since he was this tall,” Haar lowered his palm to waist level. “About as troublesome as a thorn in a paw. Would have had enough grey hairs to be mistaken for a polar bear, if that was possible.”

“I hear you,” Rhodes for a second got that half exasperated half amused half fond expression that must have been him in MIT.

“The only authority he ever listened to was his father. But the man has been dead for fifty years now… and he has not visited his grave, because your people did not let him.”

Rhodey turned serious.

"We apologize."
Haar hummed approvingly, before commenting:

“It is not me you should be explaining this to…”

They must have passed ground level, because concrete was replaced by rough stone more and more often. Metal stairs, metal pipes and cables in metal casings, some of them as thick as a human arm. Red dots of cameras hidden from view. Chilly, a constant humm of something big and mechanical raising goosebumps up his spine... By the time they turned the corner, the Russians were the only ones calm.

What came into view, were a man and a woman. The woman a stunning beauty with long silvery blond hair, fair skin and blue-green eyes clad in black leather attire that left her mostly bare without seeming overly revealing. An intricate mosaic of tattooed stripes covered her arms, legs, ran across her back and up the side of her neck. She was whispering something in soft Russian...

The man was almost her polar opposite, covered from head to toe in what seemed to be hooded robes done in soft earthy colors. The lower half of his face was obscured by a black scarf, his hands - by fingerless gloves of soft leather. He was whispering too, in a language that made Sam's and Rhodey's (and about every American soldier's that went through Afghanistan) hackles rise. They squished the hostility as soon as it appeared, though, keeping it professional, because... one person doesn't answer for the crimes the lot of those terrorists committed, not because of the language he speaks.

“Katya?”

“Hush, love. They are almost done.”

Sam followed their line of sight, only to freeze startled at the sight of a workshop straight from a Johnny Mnemonic movie, aflame with holograms done in ominous orange-red, rare brilliant blue sparkles not making much to soothe the harshness. Six giant monitors all showing the same thing - a human shape painted red on black. Tendrils of light-blue slowly crept from his left shoulder down the length of his spine, some of them slowly making their way into the hologram's head. Beside it - a number and a phrase.

78% to completion.

Thrown off by the light show Sam nearly missed them: a metal table, an unfamiliar man on it, lying with his eyes closed, and... Tony Stark, typing on his laptop with speed and precision few pianists can achieve. The genius looked like he usually did after a week-long engineering binge, but... very much alive and sane which was a relief. The workshop wasn’t soundproof, but he didn’t seem to care, functioning in his own little world...

“Baby girl, what’s the status?”

“Neural pathways within the spinal cord are reconstructed to 100%, body acceptance level – 80% and rising…” Friday sounded pleased... and hopeful.

“Good, good…”

“D took charge of higher neural activity pathway reconstruction – he has more experience with fine control manipulations. I’m moving onto bone tissue rehabilitation…”

“Do that, please. D?”

“Current mission progress rate 85%, level of body acceptance – 90% and rising,” a grave mechanical
voice answered him making the Avengers jump; Sam’s jaw dropped, because… what?! This is D?! Friday’s-crush-old-dude D?! “Healing factor will take care of unplanned damage.”

“Is there any… damage?”

“There is none. Estimate time to completion – 15 minutes and counting…”

“Nice, nice… huh, now that’s a thought… numbers flowing your way, guys!”

“Got them, Boss!”

“Affirmative.”

“Snowflake? You with me, sugarplum?”

The man on the table hummed. He was conscious through the whole thing. There was also the fact that there is only one person – in the world! – who the engineer would call ‘Snowflake’ with so much rough emotion.

“Feel anything different?”

“My nose…”

“What’s wrong with your nose?”

“Itches…”

For a few seconds Tony just stared at him over the laptop screen incredulous, before giving an indignant huff, standing up and scratching that particular itch away.

“Thank you, solntse moyo (sun of mine). So much better…”

“You’re lucky we’re in the middle of something here…”

“Are you going to punish me?”

“Yeah, tie you up with my tie!”

The man… no, the Soldier smiled, a barely there upward quirk of lips, murmuring:

“Scary…”

“Don’t you push me! Seriously, though, from one to ten how is it?”

“A four… four and a half, when Mister D decides to glide directly over my nerves…”

“Huh… interesting…” fingers started typing with renewed energy. “Numbers!”

“Oh, that’s very clever, Boss!”

“… unorthodox solution. I approve. Time to completion - reduced to 7 minutes and counting…”

The percentage on the big screens shifted showing an optimistic 90%. What the fuck have they walked in on? So Sam picked up his jaw, took a subtle breath in and out and tried to see past the obvious.

Tony wasn’t kidnapped, nor was he brainwashed, but he still packed his bags and left to Russia
without much of a backwards glance. Not alone, but in a company of a man no one had seen before. A one-armed man, which is a rather strange choice of company to travel with… and Steve said that was a Hydra agent. The rest of their detective work was based on that… until Friday, under a great deal of pressure, disclosed some of her Boss’s personal files: his search, his findings, his correspondence with the Russian War Veteran Association… what kind of Hydra agent would hold contacts with a Veteran Association? Unless in was some kind of code…

They tracked them to Irkutsk, to some old man’s house, where they apparently stayed. Fury decided to lead the mission, taking only Nat with him, although Steve all but begged him to include them all in the operation… Sam noticed how James watched the drama unfold from the sidelines, keen eyes of the sniper taking in every flinch and twitch, face carefully blank. There was something he wasn’t telling.

Sunny didn’t participate in the discussion at all. No one asked him, nor was he bursting with a desire to share any thoughts regarding the issue. The younger Soldier hid himself in Barnes’s side, hid his face in the side of his neck, concentrated on the comforting glide of the hand across his back… the counselor in him sounded the alarm. But then Clint brought what was left of Fury’s team back home, and he was shocked all over again…

No one died, but some of the SHIELD agents sure wished they were – most of the fractures were done with a cruel sort of creativity that would take ages and heavy therapy to heal. Fury was carried straight into the medical ward, and Nat… didn’t say anything.

The countdown reached 95% when somebody (anybody!) from the team decided to actually do anything. And, of course, it had to be Steve.

“Tony?!” the Captain sounded like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

The reaction was instantaneous. Tony’s entire frame went rigid. The Soldier’s eyes shot open, pools of icy blue, and he made a move to stand up, but was stopped by the engineer’s hand coming to rest on his chest.

“You can’t move yet. I’ll take care of it.”

A nod so subtle, blink and you’ll miss it, and the master assassin stood down. Tony, though, left his stool, settled down the laptop he was holding and reached out to the side flexing his fingers as if pulling the strings of an invisible harp… and it suddenly became painfully obvious just who Tony Stark is…

Ironman.

The armor, enveloping him from the fingers up, hundreds of red and gold plates in a blur of clicks and whirls assembling around his standing form, was a mesmerizing sight. When he finally turned around to greet them, it was not his face the team saw, but the mask. A sign that Tony was tired: of media smiles, smartass quips to cover pained winces, polite facades…

How he really felt he didn’t want them to know, not even Sam! And the mask was meant only for those who were on the wrong side of a repulsor blast… they were on the wrong side of the repulsor blast…

“I would prefer to take this outside… don’t want to trash such a nice lab… oh, hey there, Rhody-bear! Fancy meeting you here!”

“Tones, I thought I told you to travel in the hum-drum-vee from now on,” Colonel Rhodes was
smiling though, the nervous tension leaving him little by little. Tony barked out a laugh, understanding the reference, before teasingly pointing out:

“I left a note… And a phone, for the matter… you could have called, jelly bean!”

“I was told you left with a Hydra agent… who beat up Fury and his team of care-bears.”

“He didn’t beat up Fury – I did that!”

Way to kick away the stool from under ones feet… for a few seconds they just gaped at him, Steve included, but they shook it off rather quickly.

“O-kay… let’s start from the beginning… maybe in a different setting?” Colonel Rhodes shot a glance to Colonel Zateinik, as if inquiring. The Russian just nodded, answering that yes, they have a free conference room.

“No can do! Can’t believe I’m going to say this, but… we need to talk, and until we do… I’m not going anywhere.”

“So, plain and simple, what happened? Why’d you leave? Why did you leave the way you did, going off the grid so… unexpectedly?”

“Don’t paint me as some tragic hero, platypus. That’s just not nice. Secondly, what was wrong with the way we left? If we wanted to disappear, as in vanish off the face of the Earth, we would’ve used cash from the start… and you really think I don’t know how to manipulate a CCTV feed… from my phone. Thirdly, we just went to visit some close relatives… who happen to live here. The End.”

“…we?”

“Yes, we: me and my soulmate.”

“And here I thought he is a Hydra agent…”

Ironman turned his faceplate to Steve.

“That is one way to put it. Omitting crucial details again, Rogers?”

“So he isn’t a Hydra agent?”

“That’s beside the point…”

The counter struck 100%, and it occurred to Sam that despite the display of hostility Tony wasn’t intending to fight them… probably. He was stalling…

“High neural activity pathway restoration is complete,” said D in his grave mechanical voice. “I recommend a series of field tests.”

The Soldier hummed his approval and stood up…

***

He never knew how damaged he was until he couldn’t feel the familiar aches and pains anymore. The serum washed over him, like a warm wave… so much energy, so much power…

His sunshine’s gift made just for him.
While he was listening to his new/old body, the arm was listening to him, studying him. Smart technology…

He could feel eyes on him as well: when he pulled on a dress-shirt, when he returned the thigh-holster with his favorite handgun (a Stark Automatic designed by Howard Stark, ironically) to its rightful place, tattoos on full display…

Well, hail Hydra to you.

“The hair tie is in my pack, Tasty Freeze,”

Yakov couldn’t help a pleased little smile. Tony knew him well… and brought the special ones. It took a few moments to comb through the mess of strands with his fingers before gathering them in something of a man-bun. All set he walked around the examination table and stood by Ironman’s side. The bond between them simmered with protectiveness, the serious kind, and if they thought Tony wouldn’t fight them… he didn’t want to, yes, but when push came to shove he would give it his all.

“Colonel Rhodes, it is nice to see you again.”

“So it is you…”

“Indeed.”

“Maybe, you will tell me what the hell is going on here? In simple words.”

“In simple words…” the Soldier cocked his head to the side, much like a puzzled canine would. “In simple words, you made a mistake…”

Rhodey turned serious. Not what he was expecting to hear, not by a longshot, but it didn’t make the issue any less important. It just meant that the core of the reasoning was personal… and wasn’t related to the cause. The consequences of it, though…

“Explain.”

“How many Hydra bases were raided by the good Captain and his team during the time we were… away?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. Hydra does not leave insulting actions without retaliation. A simple, yet practical philosophy… and they know where your base is, because it is not that big of a secret, so if the Avengers are here, then who is guarding the Compound?”

Tony figured it out first, the white-hot panic in the bond a sound indication.

“Friday!”

“On it, Boss!”

“I will assist.”

“… thank you, D.”

The lights in the workshop dimmed, the two AI’s attention half a globe away. Tony relaxed a faction, but was still ready to fly on a moment’s notice.
“How long will it take for them to check were you right… or were you right?”

“Depends… Antosha knows Miss Friday’s capabilities better than I.”

“And this D fellow?”

“Dead Hand is most capable.”

Shock was a good look on them, pity this wasn’t the best moment to savoir it.

Both teams moved to the promised conference room. It was done in the same cyber-punk style everything on the basement levels seemed to be. Katerina snuggled with Haar. Anwar and Khan stood side by side. The Avengers took a row of seats closest to the door, Tony and Yakov – the seats closest to the screen.

“Boss, we have a situation. There was an attack on the Compound… last night,” Friday for the first time didn’t bother with human speech imitations and sounded about as mechanical as her counterpart. “Just like Big Brother said, it was them… and they had the Book with them.”

“Oh, this is bad… very-very bad… they took Kotov?”

“I… think they were misinformed about the nature of Mister Kotov’s trigger words.”

“… he went berserk on them,” Tony by the looks of it was a step away from starting to bite at his nails. “Vision? James?”

“Vision managed to secure the Book, but… J.B and Sunny had to be moved to the Hulk-proof room.”

“The safest place… smart move. Sunny is most likely so out of it he sees everyone else in red hues… Snowflake, can he come out of this state on his own?”

“Highly depends on the order he was given…”

“Knowing them it was probably something along the lines of Kill James Buchannan Barnes.”

“You are probably right. That won’t happen, though…”

“Why?”

“Or he would have done so by now.”

“… I hate psychology.”

Yakov did too.

Chapter End Notes

A Su-35 fighter jet at an airshow)
https://youtu.be/r3h2PIo0tt0
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tony keeps his promise, D gets a tune-up and the Avangers find themselves with free time...
Questions are asked and answered.
A long flight home and damage control...

Chapter Notes

Another somewhat introspective chapter... must be the rain ;)  
Some heads-up, though...

Translating proverbs is one of the most complicated things and mostly done by finding another proverb with a similar message from the culture which language you are translating onto... so 'вода камень точит' conveys the notion that even such a hard substance as stone could be washed into nothingness with time...

Evgeniy Petrosyan is a famous Russian comedian) kind of became a symbol of humor in the CIS states, but like most stand-up comedians he had good days... and *bad* days, so if someone calls you this, it most likely is a sign that your joke landed kinda flat... :)

'Отче наш' means 'Our Father'

Feedback is always welcome)

While Tony tinkered with D’s systems, because he was a man of his word, the Avengers used the time to lounge about the base a bit, to get to know its inhabitants a bit better… only to be met with a wall of polite neutrality and a lot of locked doors.

Rhodey found that he rather enjoyed the unexpected time off… and the view from the edge of the landing strip, a cup of hot herbal tea in hand. Whatever the brew was, it clearly had medicinal properties, because… he felt better, the muscles of his back and his legs hurting less. He asked Yakov about it once he noticed the changes, because it was the man who kept giving it to him with honey or sea-buckthorn jam. Earned him a sad smile…

A family recipe...

Tony later told him about his grandfather being a doctor. Strange to think the man had a family at all… but Rhodey was certain he will get used to it. So he drank the tea, thanked the Soldier’s granddad and watched the sun rise and set. A breathtaking view! Peaceful like no other…

A rustle of fabric behind his back told him he wasn’t alone to admire the nature’s beauties today. Wasn’t expecting to see Anwar, though, without his scarf and with the hood of his robes down to boot… the man was silent, fingers running over a set of wooden prayer beads, well-polished by
years of extensive use. What was strange was the small silver Cristian cross attached to them…

The geomancer spoke first, all the while caressing the cross with gentle fingers.

“I met my soulmate in the middle of the second Chechnya campaign, a young boy barely past twenty… not even a soldier, but dressed like them, to not stand out. An interpreter for the high command, a specialist in Middle Eastern cultures and languages… his mark was written in classic Arabic, the same the Coran is written in… it read ‘Allah is merciful’,” Anwar smiled a little proud smile. “He studied…”

“And where were you in this picture?”

“I was behind the landslide that put him in a wheel-chair…”

“You didn’t know.”

“No. I only had the beginnings of ‘Отче наш’, the simplest of Christian prayers, written on my inner thigh…”

“So. You were an extremist…”

“In the beginning, yes, I was. Now, though… I have too much blood on my hands to walk away, even if I seized believing in false prophets.”

“… people are still after you.”

“Better it be me, than him. Stubborn man, still visits me every night… вода камень точит (constant dropping wears away a stone), as they say.”

“Oh… you dream-walk too? I was told it was rare.”

“It is… not many know about this blessing of Allah. Might just be a curse…”

“Tony and… Yakov do it too. That’s how they met, actually… through dreams.”

“Never met in person?”

“Not until recently. But I think this is not what you wanted to talk about, was it?”

“Yes. I wanted to ask about the braces…”

Anwar was… interesting. He cared for the man he wronged, deeply, despite Islam having a strong policy against same sex relationships, fated or not. Orthodox Christianity wasn’t much better, if Rhodey understood correctly, if a bit more accepting on the general human level, but that boy… a man now, just kept visiting, never leaving his soulmate alone. Anwar did the same… and he really wanted to see his mate walking again. Ergo – the talk about Colonel’s walking aids.

“You should tell him about the possibilities… the final decision is up to him.”

“It is, but he’ll just say ‘Well, damn! I just learned how to drive this thing’…”

Rhodey, remembering his own wheel-chair escapades all too well, gave a sympathetic laugh. Anwar smiled too, a heathy bit of humor present.

“What is he up to now? That war ended a long time ago.”
“University professor. Tries to teach future orientalists some Eastern wisdom… most do not treat him seriously, because of his condition. They just don’t know… how much will power it takes to keep these powers at bay.”

“You mean…”

“We share it… this burden was always meant for two.”

Rhodey turned pensive. It would seem that there always will be things he, as a person without a special person, would never understand. Didn’t mean he couldn’t be Tony’s rock, though…

“And how’s the other stuff?”

“Mister Stark is almost done with the promised upgrades.”

“A few more days?”

“A few more days.”

***

“I didn’t mean in like that…”

Mismatched hands, flesh and metal, froze, then put the piece of oiled cloth with the small gun part, wrapped in it, away. Steve stilled, waiting for the man to look up, thought that this time he would be ready…

…you can’t possibly be prepared for something like this.

The Soldier’s gaze was… heavy, like an anvil, and hit just as hard. That gaze striped a person to the core, leaving him rough and bloody… Steve gulped, but stood his ground – they were in the armory, no windows, one exit…

…nowhere to run.

The master assassin broke eye contact, losing interest first, and returned to his cleaning, methodical and precise like a Swiss watch. He had all the time in the world.

“What did you mean then… boy?” his English was perfect, the accent absolutely intentional… Tony liked it, everybody else, though, found it ‘creepy as shit’, quoting Clint. “By insulting my soulmate so…”

Truth here was the best policy.

“… I don’t know.”

“That is a shame, but if you have nothing to say… maybe, you should… leave?”

“… I will… just… could you tell me about Howard? You seem to know him… a different side of him…”

The Soldier smiled with a hint of approval.

“You want to dissociate… good. Speaking of Howard Stark, though… he was looking for you his entire life, turned his house into your shrine… he re-invented the serum to have time with you and I can only assume it was his lab he was speeding off to that night, after the gala…”
“He married Tony’s mother, because he had to… for social status and reputation. He treated my soulmate like an investment… had Antosha been born a girl, he would have been married off to some…” here Yakov grumbled something unsavory in Russian, “…rich bastard as soon as he turned somewhat legal. But my sunshine was born a boy… and a genius therefor an even more valuable asset, you see.”

Steve couldn’t… see, that is. The image of Howard was giving him whiplash: the witty mouthy genius-engineer, seller of wonders… and this.

“It wasn’t always bad. He kept his family clothed and fed… gave Tony an education… gave him space to grow… not too much, just enough to regulate the direction of his evolution… make guns, not robots… Tony compromised by building smart guns and making robots as a hobby,” the Soldier’s smile became crooked and crazy and fond. “Clever, clever boy…”

“He… didn’t love them.”

“No, he didn’t,” mismatched hands assembled the gun with practiced ease, mechanical, meditative. “It wasn’t his fault… but he could have done many things differently. You don’t need to love someone to respect them, but all the love and respect of one Howard Stark was reserved only for you…”

Steve, contrary to popular belief, had seen some grief in his life. You can’t live through the Great Depression and not see any. He’d seen a fair share of unhappy marriages too. Even if the advice was sound, people weren’t always that smart to actually use it…”

“Do you think we would have been happy?”

“You either accept your soulmate… or you don’t. There is nothing in the middle,” the last weapon piece clicked into place, the Soldier gave the gun in his hands a cursory look over before placing it aside and reaching for a different one. Steve saw a certain finality in the shift of the Soldier’s powerful shoulders under the light-grey dress-shirt… he was speaking from experience.

“…this happened to you.”

“No, the Chair did.”

Steve, already beyond stressed by the influx of information, blanched. They dream-walked to each other, this he knew, but it had to start somehow, somewhere. The boy in those B.A.R.F.-induced videos was so alarmingly young… and all young boys are curious. Genius boys – even more so… He put two and two together and got a predictable four.

“Oh shit…”

“Language, Captain,” now the Russian was mocking him, but the smirk vanished just as suddenly, as it appeared, exchanged for blankness. “I thought I would never see him again. Antosha proved me wrong. Regarding your situation… Think about it this way: had you not volunteered for the Rebirth Program, would he still see you? Or it was the change the serum brought that triggered his interest?”

And wasn’t that a horrible thought…

***

Clint found Natasha in the mess hall, staring at her starkphone screen with a very strange expression.
The archer casually strode over, peeked over her shoulder at the screen… and saw a dog pic. It was sitting in a tub filled with bubbly water almost to the brim and looked miserable. Under the pic was a single line comment in Russian – ‘Принимаем банные процедуры (We are taking a bath)’ and a winking smiley face.

“Wow, Nat! Never knew you’re into these things!”

“What things?” the Widow raised a questioning brow.

“Why cute animal pictures, of course!”

“That… thing is not cute.”

“O-kay…” Clint was taken aback by the reaction. “Why’d you keep it then? If you don’t like it…”

“The man who sent it… he is kind.”

“Oh! You have an admirer… way to go!”

That startled an incredulous laugh out of her.

“He’s eighty-something years old, Clint… and is the Soldier’s baby-brother.”

Now it was Barton’s time to be startled out of his socks.

“So it was his yard I had to pick you up from?!”

“… yes.”

“Embracing the awkward…”

And it was… tremendously so. When Clint flew in and landed on the road on the other side of someone’s picket fence, the injured agents were already dragged almost to the front gates. Nat, ruffled and expression unreadable, was following a small white-haired old man in a set of impressive glasses, a first aid kit in hand. The man looked genuinely worried about the people he was tending to… except Fury. He kicked the unconscious Director in the ribs with a vicious kind of glee and a growled out ‘Это тебе за Мишу, урод! (That’s for Misha, you creep!)’. Eventually they loaded all the injured into the quinjet, and Clint took off, feeling extremely humbled for reasons unknown.

“So… have you been writing to each other for long?”

“No. Sometimes you need a person to talk to about delicate things.”

“You always went to me before.”

“Not all problems you can help me with, Yastrebok (little hawk). You simply don’t have the knowledge.”

“Oh,” that made sense in a way, because before she switched sides Nat had a whole different life; he was still disappointed a bit, though. “If it’s something private, something personal, you’re not obliged to tell me anything you don’t want. Friendship doesn’t work that way.”

The Widow smiled a soft little smile. It seemed to illuminate her from within, softening the wry lines around her mouth and pushing away the cold calculating gleam from her green eyes. God, she was beautiful… even with hair dyed blond.
“Thank you.”

“It’s nothing really.”

“We talk about the Red Room… most of the time. There are things I haven’t mentioned to anyone. Then they just seemed strange. Now, when we know the facts we know, they started making sense. You know that the Winter Soldier was the one that trained the Black Widows in combat and tactics, right?”

Barton, sensing an important piece of Nat’s personal history coming, took a seat on the bench near her, then reconsidered, ran over to the snack and coffee vending machines (well, they weren’t exactly vending anything, the small bucket with round metal chips to feed it with being right there; they didn’t have cooks here, so the Russian team took turns in the kitchen and Barton didn’t feel very comfortable stealing their food) and brought them both cups of cappuccino.

“Yes, you told me.”

“He didn’t sleep much. Was it due to the serum or force of habit, I don’t know. There was one time, though, when I was… maybe ten years of age? Decided to sneak into the kitchen for a glass of water… we were not allowed to leave our beds at night, you see. The lights in the training hall were on, which wasn’t a surprise… when he didn’t sleep, he trained. I got curious and peeked in, and found him doing basic moves, beginner-level basic moves we long ago mastered. And the way he moved too… the moves may be the ones we learned, but the style they were presented in – absolutely different.”

“What do you mean?”

“The focus wasn’t on strength and agility, like ours was. We were physically fit. That style was focused on precision and the element of surprise… for someone weaker.”

Clint's attention strayed to the glowing arrow shaped pendant he was wearing non-stop now, and the conversation that lead to it coming into his possession.

_He taught me to fight._

It would seem quite literally.

“You think Tony was there with him.”

“I don’t know,” Nat got a faraway look in her eyes. “I have never seen him fight outside the suit. In the suit he fights differently.”

“We are so not going to fight him to find out…”

“Afraid of a little action, Yastrebok (little hawk)?”

“I want to live another day, thank you! But, Nat, how can his brother help you with this?”

“He understands the Soldier best, because there are other, not Tony related moments I have no explanation for…”

“Such as?”

“There was a time when he was absent (sent on a mission most likely), and for a week we had a different instructor. We thought the Soldier was merciless, but this man… this man was something
else,” Nat paused to take a sip of her coffee. “The first thing he said to us was that he owned us and we were his to do as he pleased… training sessions with him were just poorly masked beatings, and if you failed to stand up in the end of the lesson, you were to go to his private courters for additional schooling… it wasn’t ‘schooling’ at all. So when the Soldier returned, one of the younger girls even ran up to him and hugged his legs, crying her eyes out. He said nothing, just nodded at us to get ready like he usually did… but later we found out that the pervert was found in one of the dog pens: naked, gutted like a fish and with his reproductive organs cut off… no traces, like he did it all himself.”

“Wow, that was… harsh!” a moment later, though, Barton shed all the false cheer. “But if it were my kids, I would’ve done the same thing…”

“Vsevolod Igorevich said as much… that we were as close to being his children as we could be… hard to believe, actually. Everything about him is hard to believe.”

They were interrupted by the sound of opening doors, and a shuffling of footsteps.

Tony.

Stark looked worn-out, but there was an aura of work well done about his tired frame. He wobbled straight towards the coffee vending machine, collapsed against it and rasped out:

“Coffee, please…”

The machine gave a sympathetic ping, before mixing him something with lots of cream, sugar and sprinkles.

“D, you are officially my favorite cybernetic god! And you really shouldn't have…”

But he took the offered cup with no small degree of joy. The red metal of the unfolded watch-gauntlet covering his right hand with glove-like perfection, an ever present accessory as of late, though, felt like a slap to the face. Barton stifled the rising regret and returned to his cappuccino. Nat did the same.

They weren't the closest of friends with the heir of the Stark fortune, but this…

This was the first line in the sand they actually saw being drawn. It stung.

“Mister Stark, I had a feeling I would find you here”, Colonel Zateinik jumped out of the relative darkness of the corridor with the grace of a seasoned boogeyman.

“Colonel? You do look human on occasion!”

“How very Petrosyan of you...” was his deadpan reply, and yes… the secret service agent was in his civilian get up today.

“Who? On second thought, never mind! What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I spoke with the President this morning. He is interested.”

“Nice! But the fact that you can just call him is something I find strange…”

Zateinik shrugged, and continued:

“And he is even more interested as to why would such an influential company as Stark Industries wants to open a state of the art rehabilitation center here and not in Moscow, for example.”
“Owning a multibillion dollar company has its perks, what can I say. I can build just about anything anywhere I want… within the state’s legal boundaries. Moscow, frankly speaking, doesn’t have the nature… Maybe, I’ll even attract some investments into the region who knows?”

“Have you discussed the matter with Miss Potts?”

“She is all about branching out.”

“We will contact her office then: to invite your company into participating in the government development program…”

Tony gave him enthusiastic thumbs up while taking a generous gulp out of his cup. He was still using the vending machine to stay upright, but now in a more relaxed fashion…

“You look dead on your feet, Mister Stark. You should rest.”

“I’ll sleep on the way home. Now my brain just won’t let me… only Snowflake can make the gears in there slow down. Could you drag me to where he is, please?”

Colonel Zateinik silently offered him a shoulder to lean on. Clint and Nat watched them go…

Neither man acknowledged their existence.

***

They left for home the same day. Sam and Rhodey - a couple of phone numbers heavier. Steve had a lot of deep thoughts to think over, while Wanda was unexpectedly gifted with an old manuscript acquired by the Dead Hand on some black market sell-off a few years ago. The super-spies had nothing unusual to talk about… and all of them, one way or another, were shooting glances at the new additions to the quinjet passenger register.

Yakov Zimin, the Winter Soldier, struck an intimidating picture. Even in plain clothes which did nothing to ease the vibes of ‘tall, dark and dangerous’ he had going on. Leather jacket, dark-blue shirt, black cargo pants and combat boots presented a wide playground for those who like to keep secrets… as well as secret blades and secrets guns. The problem of long hair, it would seem, was solved radically and in two seconds flat, meaning the casual pony-tail didn’t survive the meeting with one of the Soldier’s knives – the only explanation for the odd angle of the cuts, but the man wore the new look with a confidence that made it look stylish. His luggage consisted of one duffel bag that most likely had not only his possessions, but Tony’s packed in as well, and the familiar suit-case armor he carried in his metal hand. With the flesh one he held the genius himself - true to his word Tony was out like a light, snoring gently into his soulmate’s neck, completely comfortable with being carried around like a giant teddy-bear.

Such casual displays of super-strength raised the hairs on the back of Sam’s neck in ways that Steve’s soggy attempts at humor by running circles around him every morning didn’t. In his head the Captain was strongly associated with a golden retriever, kind of harmless, even if the dog itself was big. Barnes in the same system of associations was labeled as a shaggy German shepherd who had it rough, but pulled through and Kotov was a ginger street cat who trusted no one, even the hand that fed him. Zimin, though, wasn’t much of a house animal, abandoned or not. Tony didn’t seem to mind. On second thought, why should he? He’d known all along…

They boarded, and the jet took off. Two familiar Su-35s escorted them till the state border, and disappeared in a flurry of aerobatic maneuvers for them to remember him by. The rest of the flight was quiet, too quiet, and they still needed a plan, so it was up to Sam Wilson to throw himself under
the bus… again.

“If Sunny can’t shake off the mind control alone and you can’t simply knock him out to erase the programming, how are you going to help him?”

“I can knock him out, but it would erase nothing,” Yakov answered in a low voice; Tony was snoozing against his shoulder, he didn’t want to wake him. “The conditioning is too deeply engraved. We can try to overrule the triggers… I am still his commanding officer, but the key role in this will belong to James…”

“Because they are soulmates?”

“Yes.”

“You make it sound like the bond is something… something all-powerful…”

The Soldier shook his head in disagreement.

“No, it is not. Your soulmate will always be your greatest weakness. Until you meet him the life you live is half-empty. When you meet him, your greatest fear becomes losing him: to death, to accidents, to other things you can’t control or can’t fight. The only comforting thought is that your soulmate feels the exact same thing… if he is old enough. If he is not, the mission of protecting the both of you falls solely onto your shoulders…”

“Like you protected Tony?”

“Tony protected me just as much, in his own way. He brought a drop of normalcy to the surrounding madness.”

“Yeah?” Sam was genuinely curious… and he also found the stories about little Tony and his scary Soldier extremely cute, sue him.

“I had a solo mission in the States… a rare occasion. And Antosha was soundly asleep in his bedroom at home – an even rarer occasion. The temptation of visiting him was high, but that would have resulted in a lot of bloodshed, so… we broke into a comic book store instead,” Yakov huffed out a near silent laugh. “It was fun… even if I didn’t understand half of it and he had no words to tell me the stories behind the other half.”

Yep, the cutest stories… if you leave out the bloody parts. Then something occurred to him, and Sam had to pause.

“Hold on a sec… if you were in one place at the same time… that means he followed you on that mission?!”

“I am good at what I do… my sunshine didn’t need to see any of it. And Antosha knew what all the weapons were for anyway… he was the son of the manufacturer who made most of them after all.”

Now the team, except for maybe Wanda who was engrossed in reading her old tome, was eyeing the engineer with a different sort of appreciation. Then Steve suddenly frowned.

“You said Tony knew your weapons. But Howard never had contracts with any other government agency except SHIELD and the state military… or did he?”

“I was equipped with Stark weapons more often than not. They could have just bought them, but in the late 80s Hydra was already moving its headquarters to the USA, so it was highly unlikely…”
“Stark thought he was supplying SHIELD, but in truth the bulk of his work went to supporting Hydra?!”

The answer was obvious, so Yakov didn’t bother with words. He just opened his thigh holster, got the Stark Automatic out, clicked the safety on and threw it across the salon to the Captain. Only his enhanced reflexes saved him from getting a face full of gun, because it all happened so fast Sam hadn’t the time to register what flew by… and yet beside him Nat was slowly lowering one of her smaller pistols.

“What’s this?”

“One of my favorites. Twenty years of heavy duty usage, including swimming in salt water, near toxic waste and more sewers I can count, but still works like a charm… Howard Stark designed it.”

Steve looked the gun over once again, this time paying more attention to details. Well, it certainly had Howard’s style, his artist’s eye told him as much, but there was also something else… another hand, perhaps? An oddly familiar one too…

“Didn’t know he had an assistant…”

“He didn’t. He drew the blue-print for this a step away from passed out drunk, and when Antosha crept into his study next morning and saw them he thought it was another training exercise for his lessons, so many flaws were in there… They often did that: Howard would give him a print of something impossible or borderline faulty and watch Tony struggle with it. If Tony had nothing on the print by dinner… no dinner.”

“So Tony fixed them…”

“Yes. That earned him a hard slap to the face: for entering his father’s study without knocking, when he brought the prints back. His cheek swelled up so badly he couldn’t eat anything solid for two days straight… the gun, though…It became a big hit.”

“It was mass-produced?!”

“Yes. Like most of the other ‘impossible’ projects that turned out to be not quite so impossible… I would like it back, please.”

Steve, still a bit shell-shocked by the news, complied. The gun returned to its holster.

“That’s how they knew about the serum – they were keeping tabs on him from here!” called out Clint from the pilot’s seat.

“James said you were planning to run,” said Colonel Rhodes, for the first time since the beginning of the flight. “Why didn’t you?”

“Ah, James… wanted to tell you that all will be fine, and did not know what words to use… It was a sound plan, doable. All was set and we were only waiting for my sunshine to finish his studies. He wanted to get as many degrees as he possibly could, build up as much reputation as he possibly could… we weren’t planning on taking anything from that house. We agreed to meet after that one last mission… he waited for me, but I never came… they applied the triggers for the first time in twenty years. Director Pierce wasn’t leaving anything to chance: fulfil the mission, report, and then another set of orders: forget, obey, sleep… When they woke me up, twenty years later, I was like a clean slate… again.”

“James also told me about the pain thing…”
“He should really learn how to keep his thoughts to himself…”

“Nah, Snowflake… J.B. is cool as an ice-cube… derailed you with that bad-boy attitude like a pro…” came from Tony’s side in a sleepy mumble. “That Brooklyn twang should be illegal too… why the serious faces, people? We only have a couple of super-soldiers to save, not the freaking planet…”

“How much have you heard, lover mine?”

“Oh, you know… here and there…”

“Translation from Tony-speak: every word,” Rhodey was smiling, though.

“Oh this is how it’s going to be, Sour Patch, you two ganging up on me?”

“Wait till Clint gets us home… I’m so going to give you one hell of a chase down those hallways of yours in my fucking wheel-chair and you’ll fucking let me, you hear?”

Tony made a squeaky sound and tried to hide under his Soldier’s arm… the metal one, which resulted in the genius crawling all over his lap.

“Save me, Snowflake! I’ll build you a potato gun!”

Yakov, amused by the whole situation and enthusiastically participating in the ‘Castle Iron Fist’ impersonation, perked up at that.

“…potato gun?”

“Oh shit! Seriously? You’ve got a Russian master assassin targeting my back bumper… thanks/no thanks, Tones!”

“Who said anything about targeting? We shoot to thrill!”

“Guys, maybe, you should, I don’t know, consider paint-ball?”

“Why?”

“Less traumatizing than catching a potato to the head, don’t you think?”

Tony just sniggered at him from his hiding place under his soulmate’s arm and said nothing. Yakov eventually shushed him back into sleeping…

And Sam remembered the movie nights the team used to share, and these two claiming the far end of the couch in the darkest corner of the room by coincidence… not. It made the star in Tony’s chest shine brighter and the ice in the Soldier’s eyes seem colder. They cuddled the same as then: Yakov occupying the far corner of the bench, a seemingly casual cat-like sprawl they’ve all seen how fast he can shake off, and Tony always finding the comfortable position to sprawl on him and make it look like the best place a man could ever be, nuzzling his soulmate’s neck and leaning into the touch of those metal fingers forming a protective cage around his ‘heart’ even in his sleep…

Where did he get the vidranium from, though? Wakanda didn’t sell even a dust speck of the stuff, much less an amount needed to build an arm…

Something (probably, his butt nerve as Kotov liked to call it; in Russian it sounded like a thing straight out of a med school manual) told him it was best not to ask.

***
The Compound was fine. It was the East wing that was in ruins… all shattered walls and broken in roofs. The workshop looked like a bomb went in, except… it was no bomb. Tony knew his bombs. What leveled their Sanctuary were grenades… and repulsor blasts.

Whatever security measures Snowflake and Fri added to that Perimeter Protocol, they most obviously worked. Those older models of armor he kept under glass cases weren’t there for the sake of his pride (despite what others might think). He kept them armed and operational for this very reason…

Yakov stopped him from rushing in. His light was on high alert the second they left the jet. Bad sign. Scary sign. And something was moving among the rubble…

“You think some of them lived to tell the tale?”

“I smell blood… and hear no human heartbeats.”

“No human, huh? Whose then?”

“Some of the wolves followed Captain home.”

Rogers, who was talking to a small crowd of panic-y officials several dozens of meters away, did a 180 turn and stared at them, horror pooling in his blue irises. Tony forced out a wry smile.

“They’re sticking to our wing I hope?”

“Yes. The ruins seem to be to their liking…”

“Well, that’s… nice? Maybe we should go into building animal playgrounds next… How many are there?”

“Three. One of them is gravely injured… one is guarding him and one is watching us from under that wreckage… they blew up your cars, dusha moya… and my kitchen.”

“Heretics! Left me hungry, craving your blinchiki and homeless to boot… What are we going to do with this furry problem, though? I’ve read somewhere about wolves being the only animals able to hold a grudge.”

“Normal ones – maybe. These ones were genetically engineered to be smarter than that… and then all the smartness was trained out of them… fluffy dogs - all bark, no bite.”

Tony could have sworn he heard an offended growl aimed their way. Yakov flashed a warning sneer in that direction, all teeth and sharp canines fully on display. The growling snuffed out. Instantly. The engineer who witnessed this whole pre-historic power play in action from the front row was fascinated.

“… I don’t really know how to take care of dogs, sugarplum.”

“You managed the cacti… and Misha likes you.”

“Not the same. Misha was humoring me… and Trevor is a plant.”

“Nobody is perfect.”

Steve hurriedly turned away, choosing to tackle the crowd instead of facing a bit of animal issues, the coward.
Tony pulled out his phone.

“Fri? You here, baby girl?”

“Always, Boss,” it was a relief to hear her chirpy cheery voice from the tiny speakers. “My servers are intact, no viral interventions detected. Sadly, about 95% of the cameras and 80% of the speakers were annihilated… feel kind of blind and deaf… oh, I have a feed on J.B and Sunny!”

“They are still in the Hulk-proof rooms?”

“Yes. It would seem Sunny finally allowed Sargent Barnes to wash the blood off his person… so much red…”

They shared a look. Either Kotov is slowly returning to being his spooky self or… James tamed the savage part of his soulmate. Well, maybe ‘tamed’ was a strong word… accepted it maybe? Thinking optimistic here…

“Is this what you were hoping for, Tasty Freeze?”

“Among other things…”

“Let us leave them to it then. Now, Friday, brief me about what the fuck happened here? And you don’t need to sugarcoat…”

Friday didn’t plan to. The results of her situation analysis suggested a mole. The Compound was breached from five different points, cameras and speakers disabled, panic ensured via wolves brought in by… a pizza truck.

“Original.”

“Poor wolves… Imagine the assault to their senses?”

“Hydra does not bother with such… trivial things.”

“Oh… you had to travel to a location in a pizza van too?”

“It was a garbage truck, actually… Smelled like a decomposing corpse… nearly compromised the mission when the wind changed.”

Tony wanted to feel sympathetic, but the giggles he desperately tried to mask behind a fit of coughing just wouldn't let him. The sidelong glance Yakov gave him was two parts unimpressed one part smug… Why was he smug?

“Why are you smug?”

“I have ridden a garbage truck, and you didn’t…”

“…Snowflake! What’s with the kiddy stuff… are you four?!” Tony realized he was pouting, successfully sidetracked. “And Rhodey fished me out of a dumpster once! How do you like that!”

“Мусоровоз все равно круче (A garbage truck is still cooler).”

“… you’re so sleeping on the couch tonight!”

“If we find it, sure… and you, zvezdochka (little star) will be sleeping with me…”
The engineer paused, shuffling for reasoning for his ‘why?’ when a thought occurred to him…

“No bed?”

“No bed.”

“Damn.”

Engrossed in their conversation, they totally missed the strange and amused looks from the Avengers team thrown their way. It was like they saw the two of them for the first time, despite, one way or another, living beside them for months.

Rhodey was happy to have his friend, that sassy fifteen-year old teen with eyes too mature for his age, back. Sam was happy that no one ended up dead or crippled. Clint, generally easy-going, was good with returning home, to his family. Nat was still processing the fact her mentor was… human, his monstrous skill-set aside. Wanda may not like them much, but she was happy they were together, like it was intended to be. Kamar Taj did change her view of things… and Vision played a role in that too. Captain Rogers was still trying to put some distance between himself and his delusions… and he was starting to discover the value of pain. He was frozen when Howard died, and it was all starting to come back now… bit by agonizing bit.

“Happy to see you again, Tony,” Vision appeared seemingly out of nowhere, holding a thin notebook in worn casing made of red leather with a black star in the middle close to his chest. “We were worried…”

“Vis! You okay?”

“Fully functional, as Mister D would say. Guarded this artifact with my life, like Mister Barnes told me to…”

“Thank God! And Barnes for his quick thinking…”

“The entrance to Mister Banner’s suit is blocked by rubble. They could be cleared with Wanda’s assistance, but I find it unadvisable… they don’t need any additional disturbance.”

“Noted. What are we doing with our furry problem?”

“Talk to them… they are willing to communicate, but… they will talk only to the alpha of your… pack.”

“Steve, your call! Go get’em!”

“Me?!”

“Tony, it’s not Steve… he is not the alpha of your pack, my friend… Yakov is.”

“O-kay…” the genius felt trepidation creeping in. “If he is the alpha, what that makes me?”

Yakov chuckled, leaning in to nuzzle his lover’s temple in a tender sign of affection instantly soothing his ruffled feathers.

“The alpha’s mate… and wolves mate for life.”

“Huh.”

“How are you going to talk to them, though?” asked Sam. “They sure as hell can’t speak human…”
“No trouble. I can speak wolf…”

They thought it was a joke. You know, the inside kind…

…they were wrong.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Life at the Compound after the Hydra attack...
Tony has his hands full once again...
... and Yakov does too.

Chapter Notes

Guest appearance from Ty Stone, people! Screw him all the way and back...

A little more about the wolf trio our boys 'adopted'... when I wrote about them, I had the pic from the 'Van Helsing' film with Hue Jackman in front of me) loved how they were portrayed there...
Some food for the imagination:
https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/vanhelsingmovie/images/3/33/27f10ecd1935fd3f3cfdcb9bba0b05b4/to-width-down/300?cb=20181223022349
https://i.gifer.com/9mcP.gif
May have mistakes, so let me know if you spot anything ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“At times like these I want to move back to Malibu…”

“Why, dusha moya (soul of mine)?”

“No rubble to sort through… the ocean took him!”

They watched ‘Predator’ recently. Yakov found the movie to be quite good: the scene with the scorpion touched some of his heartstrings, but the alien was drop-dead inefficient. When Tony explained that this was his first real hunt, it made some sense. He was clumsy the first time he hunted rabbits on his own too.

“You could always rebuild…”

“No. Jarvis ran that house. It wouldn't be the same.”

“You never did tell me about him. I remember you struggling with DUM-E…”

An echo of old grief filled the bond for one agonizing moment… and then Tony let it go, leaving only sadness behind.

“Well, it began on the second month after Edwin Jarvis', our butler, passing. I woke up one morning with a single, obviously crazy thought pulsing at the front of my mind… I wasn't ready to let him go! So… I coded myself a robot-butler. It wasn't him, naturally, but my Just-A-Rather-Very-Intelligent-System spoke with his voice and for a time that was enough…”
“I am sorry.”

“Not your fault, sugarplum. That one is on me… I let them manipulate me into being something I spent my whole life hating. Should have pushed harder…”

“Never liked the odds…”

Out of the blue statements weren’t unusual between them: one always knew what the other wanted to say.

“You mean…”

“Yes. You meeting James was a big gamble… but you meeting me like this… was close to impossible.”

His sunshine stilled, doing some mental calculations no doubt, before admitting:

“…yes, it was.”

“These were the steps we needed to take to be here… the only possible way.”

“I would've preferred a shortcut.”

Yakov smiled. Antosha was on Hydra’s hit-list since the age of thirteen, his abilities making too many mouths water… but the perfect moment never seemed to come, interested officers and handlers dyed here and there thus hindering the process, and, eventually, they put this particular plan on hold. And the Soldier, predictably, complied… as long as it suited him.

The hassle and buzzle provoked by the Great Werewolf Reveal, eventually, tampered down, and now the four of them were wandering the ruins like a scene from a dystopian novel come to life: Yasha, Tony and the two wolves.

It was one of the furries who found Trevor the Cactus. The little guy died like a man, long sharp spikes embedded deep in a Hydra agent’s eye. Wasn’t the only casualty, though…the Missus met her end under the sole of a combat boot. Mini-T was MIA.

“Yasha?”

“Да(Yes)?”

“Where’d you learn to speak wolfish?”

“Oh, it is a very interesting story and, like most of my stories, a very sad one. Project ‘Alpha’ was always a bio-weapon development program, you see. They started with stimulators and drugs, later moved to radiation and mutations, then to various combinations of both, human and animal test subjects. They caught a timber wolf once, put him in a cage next to mine… we had a common wall… shared food, huddled for warmth on cold winter nights. It is natural to seek comfort where you can.”

“They gave you the same treatment, didn’t they?”

“My blood was a chemical cocktail long before that, but yes. As you may have guessed, that wolf turned into something like the two fluff-balls over there…”

The wolves glared at him. ‘Your jokes are so old, grandpa! About as old as you…’ Tony couldn’t help the grin tugging at his lips.
“Sassy wolves…”

“You have no idea, solnyshko…”

“What happened later?”

“An argument between two research teams broke out: whose bio-weapon is better. Me and Grey would have had to fight to the death to prove somebodies point. I knew this. He knew this. We made peace and, when the time came, neither held back.”

“Honorable…”

“Pre-historic warrior code… things that manly men do, when they remember they are men and should be manly.”

“Ah, that… wish you didn’t have to listen to that. Haven’t seen that asshole for twenty years and would’ve been happy to not see him for another twenty! Why show up now?”

“Wanted to revel in your misfortunes…”

“Ha! But you are probably right…” Tony sighed, rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the rising headache. “Why on Earth I thought that my not-so-smart-plan to make you jealous would work?”

“Oh, it did…”

That perked the genius up, because… really? Hell yeah!

“You were beautiful…the darkest of temptations in angelic form…”

“The sweetest words are yours, honeybunch, imagine that…” Tony was blushing, but it was a good blush, felt right. “Got some pretty words of my own… you are poetry in motion!”

“Ah… and they call us, Russians, dramatic…”

“Oh come on!”

“But I liked that… Tosha, talk to me more…”

Blushing turned into good-natural huffs of laughter, the bitter aftertaste of Ty Stone nearly forgotten. Memories about that visit put up a fight, though…

The attack on the Avengers Compound was all over the news, so, of course, he slithered by: to gloat. The injured wolf nearly took his leg off when the man mistook him for road-kill and carelessly stepped on his tail with his fancy loafers. They didn’t see it happen: Yasha was doing some heavy-lifting, while Tony shimmied under the slabs of concrete and collected what was left of the tools (thank Tesla and his paranoia, the bots and some sensitive memorabilia were sent to the Tower before all hell broke loose!), but they sure heard it…

He thought some woman saw a rat or something. But when Tony turned around there stood Ty, in the terrified-but-fashionably-dressed flesh. One and Two went from scavenger mode to battle mode in one second flat, teeth bared, claws drawn…

“No! Nope! Heel, my wild brothers! Don’t eat him! Or you’ll get indigestion for sure… Why so much hair product, Ty? That’s just sick…”
Snowflake didn’t say anything then… didn’t have to, because he was an actions man much like Tony was a numbers man. The piece of ceiling the Soldier was holding for the engineer to crawl under was casually lifted, casually taken several steps to the side and casually thrown into a big pile of debris. All would’ve been well, but the piece weighed half a ton… at least.

Sadly, Ty was the heir of the Stone fortune thus not so easily intimidated by default: he went bone-white pale after the display, but stuck to his guns… whatever they were.

The hour long screaming session ended with his dramatic exclamation of ‘And this caveman is the man you chose over me?’… Tony answered by giving him the finger and asking how Sunset was doing, uploaded their sex tapes on the Net yet or their bedroom life is just that dull.

Ty left fuming. Yakov added another name to his mental hit-list. He was content to leave the past in the past, but some parts of it… he will never forget and never forgive.

“Ah-oh… I know that look,” the engineer sauntered over, reeled him in by the belt loops of his dusty jeans, honey-browns sparkling with warmth and understanding… the kiss that followed was chaste, but soothed all of the internal prickles. “I don’t want him dead, plum-muffin… I want him to suffer.”

Now the considerable portion of the Soldier’s attention was on him, eyebrows raised in question, amusement and dark delight coming off him in waves. He loved when his sunshine tapped into his evil genius side - The Merchant of Death would have been glorious to serve under…

“… I can arrange that, zolotse (precious).”

Tony hummed, contemplative, before shaking his head with a disappointed tsk.

“Not until the charity function next month. We’ll make him walk on burning coals then…”

“Understood, but I can’t help being curious…”

“Why the particular day and date?”

“Yes.”

“Stark Industries is hosting it. The function is dedicated to the opening of a medical division within the company with a prosthesis assembly line… something we never done before. So there will be a diversion and he would be there to find great joy in watching all the fruits of my labor burn… he’s predictable like that.”

“Hm…”

“We’ll even let them leave in that pretentious white Lexus limo! But… that would be the last thing we’ll let them do… hey, watch it!” one of the wolves head-butted him, ruining the ‘mad scientist’ speech; the guy had an almost deadly set of puppy dog eyes… kind of unusual to see such a thing on a beast that was almost as tall as the billionaire while sitting. “Oh… are you, guys, hungry? Hydra probably kept you on some weird-ass liquid diet…”

“Solid food and cryo-sleep don’t mix well, dusha moya (soul of mine)…”

Tony cringed and reached for his mobile…

“My treat.”

***
They were having a barbecue… or what posed for a barbecue in the enigmatic land of red stars and polar bears. It involved onions, tomatoes, sweet bell pepper - sliced and diced, eggs – all mixed into a killer omelet, and while a tired, but pleased with the day’s progress Tony munched on that, the Soldier prepared the marinade and vegetables to go with the meat…

The engineer wasn’t complaining, not a bit. He would have this over the fancy and all the way fake Saturday morning brunches that were housed at the Stark estate any day, because… Yasha just cooked. He made the most basic things like peeling potatoes look erotic… how was that even possible? He also made Tony feel brave…

The genius even baked a muffin... once, when they still had a kitchen. Wanted it to be a surprise! The ‘surprise’ part didn’t last long, because once the oven started puffing smoke the fire alarms went off! Ergo - the lopsided miserable thing, burned and too salty to even eat, because he clearly overdid it with the wrong white crystals... but Yasha was beaming! And they put it in a glass case, not unlike what Pepper did with his very first reactor. U put his everything into creating the perfect sticker, as a result coming up with a stripe of yellow paper with the words ‘The First Pancake’ in bold red letters. Tony remembered feeling sheepish…

‘The first’? More like ‘the only’…

The following would be better.

Glorious days.

***

They saved all that could be saved. Mini-T was still missing, but after examining all the evidence he had a hunch where the little plant might be… James wore very distinctive boots that left very distinctive footprints. Yasha, One and Two made short work of the debris, efficient as any bulldozer, but much more precise, so now their little bizarre family was a few pans and pots richer, had couch cushions to sit on, and, by some miracle, a semi-working set of Ironman armor. If Tony wasn’t mistaken (and he never was, when tech was in question), it was the suit that helped him survive the Chitauri invasion. Symbolic!

“Don’t worry, darling, I’m going to fix you up even better than before…”

Three huffed an amused huff from his perch, eyes twinkling gold in the descending twilight, reflecting the light of the campfire. Who needs firewood with so much broken furniture lying around? Felt oddly cathartic to burn the remnants of an old life, even if it was a happy one.

“Oh, hush you… I’m still thinking about how to name you guys… Numbers, seriously?”

Another amused huff accompanied by a low rumble. It was a strange rumble, had a subtle timbre shift to it… if he wasn’t so accustomed to listening to motors, he would have missed it.

“He says they have names. You just can’t pronounce them with your unenhanced vocal cords.”

“Oh… that’s nice! Maybe, we’ll settle on a translation of some sort?”

Another low rumble, shorter this time, different pitch. He wondered what Yakov heard with his keen super-soldier ears…

“He agrees, but before you start working on any sort of translation devices, solnyshko, you should probably know that they don’t use words to describe events, but rather a combination of sound, smell and image… complex system.”
“Yes, but they have the equipment for it... humans? Not so much. Do they have a name for you?”

“These puppies? No,” Yakov paid no mind to three irritated glares sent his way, throwing some pieces of wood into the fire. “But Grey called me something along the lines of ‘The One Who Smells of Frost and Blood Hunting When All Light Goes Out’…”

“Spooky, yet beautiful... like you…”

“Thank you, Antosha. And I just called him by the color of his fur... does not exactly compare.”

“Well, I think he didn’t mind the simplicity... names are relative things, they don’t define you... most of the time.”

“True. But there are fundamental truths, no? I will always be a soldier... And you will always have this light inside you... unbreakable. Grey could only be Grey. Have you heard from James?”

“Nope, but Fri took a peek and told me they’re sleeping now... Sunny is going to need a new arm, though. Titanium was good thinking for everyday life, but berserk mode? That guy is downright destructive, let me tell you…”

“Hm.”

“... I’m really thinking about how I don’t want to rebuild this workshop, but, at the same time, I am very reluctant to leave. With the Tower being off limits and California off the options list, that leaves the Mansion as the only potential living space…”

That house... knowing his sunshine, he didn’t change a thing, so memories of hurt, pain, indifference, anger and fear would be waiting for them around every other corner. There were happy memories too... too few, too far in between. So the Soldier said:

“No.”

Tony looked up in surprise... and gratitude. His sunshine has gotten too used to experiencing his feelings being crushed, too used to seeing others doing the crushing... the idea that he didn’t matter embedded too deep, because no one really cared.

“No?”

Yakov quirked the corner of his mouth in a barely there smile and nodded:

“No.”

“Okay,” Tony felt his spirits rise, and good food and instant coffee had nothing to do with it this time. “Do we still have our tent? I really liked our time in the woods…”

“I will set it up, but after you are thoroughly introduced to the concept of making shashlik…”

“Doesn’t sound very Russian.”

“Technically, it is not, but the Russian Empire was a big country, many cultures existed side by side... elements of various cuisines were adopted. Have you eaten shish kebab before?”

“Yeah... but it isn’t the same, is it?”

“Very similar, but no... and much like with your barbecue tradition every self-respecting man should know how to do at least the most simple one…”
Tony nodded sagely in understanding of the situation, because there will always be things that are expected for you to know… you know, by default?

“Stereotypes…”

“Yes, but I would not say they are bad ones. Men need to express themselves, feel a little bit like the hunters they are portrayed to be… impress the person they want to impress…” Yakov wiggled his eyebrows rather suggestively. Tony, settled in the heat, warmth and safety of their bond, laughed…

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Sam never pictured himself a stalker, but to simply put down the binoculars when something this interesting is going on? Not a fat chance… with Steve on one side and Barton on the other they were lying on the roof of the main building… watching.

Not creepy. At. All.

By the end of the first hour Tony Stark was officially labeled crazy in his book, that special brand of insanity that lets you accept the strange bordering on unimaginable events in your life in stride. Sam, all his training notwithstanding, would have freaked out for sure if one werewolf creature decided to sniff him from head to toe… Tony was casual and dare they say comfortable with three.

Nothing was impossible until proved impossible - the law Stark lived by. His samurai code. So when Tony came back, one of the creatures flanking him wingman style, and told them that the wolves are here to stay (and Steve nearly had an aneurysm listening to that), Wilson should have known… should have guessed…

Cap had his team. Tony was building up his… and he already had a master assassin, a master bomb expert (Sunny made perfectly clear with whom his loyalties lay) and an AI. Now he got a trio of pre-war genetically modified wolves to join… willingly.

“Well, that certainly explains the groceries…” Barton sounded like he wanted to laugh, but thought better of it. “I wonder… are they always this domestic?”

Steve answered with an unintelligible hum. He thought about it too. All day long they watched them gather the remnants of their old lives, an air of quiet efficiency about them. What could be saved went into one pile, what couldn’t – into the other.

They watched the Soldier too…

Steve never encountered other super-soldiers before, apart from Bucky and Red Scull, and he always tried to tamper down that little extra that made him Captain America to seem more… normal. Heck, he didn’t even know what his boundaries were! So when he observed the Soldier heave slabs of concrete twice his size like empty cardboard boxes without breaking a sweat, the show only left him bewildered at how comfortable the man was in his own skin.

Then Tiberius Stone arrived and for a second there the three of them thought they are about to witness the infamous Fist of Hydra in action, but no… Ty walked away alive. Shaken to the core, the mask of superior indifference cracked and nearly slipping, but alive. For how long, they couldn’t help wonder because Tony had that look in his eye… sharp, calculating, honey-brown dimmed to an unreadable dark hazel.

“Oops… here he comes,” Clint turned unusually serious. Sam looked up, puzzled.

“Who?”
“The Merchant of Death. You think that was just the press being smartass about the weapon manufacturing business? Nope… did you know Tony was kidnapped on a regular basis since the tender age of seven?”

Both Sam and Steve didn’t. Clint shrugged and continued his tale:

“Stark… the father, I mean… had a lot of enemies: some wanted his money, others wanted his weapons. Naturally, they targeted his son… didn’t know that Howard Stark doesn’t negotiate with terrorists of any kind… and sure as hell doesn’t pay them.”

“What about Tony? He just left him there?!”

“Pretty much. The kid broke out on his own every time. And, if I understood things correctly, it was among the things that were expected in that household.”

He… didn’t love them.

No, he did not…

The Soldier’s words echoed in the confines of his mind, and Steve suddenly felt nauseous. Clint went on in a more subdued tone:

“SHIELD kept an eye on the family, just in case and with orders to not interfere. Tony was maybe thirteen, when we saw him being kidnapped from his dorm room at the boarding school… didn’t interfere, obedient motherfuckers that we were, and three days later Stark received a video tape where his son was beaten to a pulp and the fucks threatened to rape him and keep raping him on film until the man paid up… it went straight into the trash bin.”

“Oh shit…”

“The kid… he knew Howard wouldn’t be coming, so at some point… he once again saved himself! By blowing up the entire warehouse… with the thugs still inside. That’s when I saw those eyes for the first time…”

“Man, Clint…”

“Yeah… so if Stone didn’t get the hint today that was his last chance to get it.”

In the meantime Tony and his makeshift family settled in for the night… on couch cushions. Tony sat cross-legged surrounded by holograms, tweaking something in the air with careful fingers… a wandering magician. The Soldier… no, Yakov busied himself first with tending to the fire, and once that was settled he moved onto preparing food… and after about ten minutes Tony was presented with a bowl of steaming omelet. The three of them were shocked to see the holograms being discarded with an artistic wave of a hand (and Tony never discards work!), and Tony dig in with gusto. But, apparently, it wasn’t over, the omelet serving only as an appetizer of sorts, because once the flames died down to burning ambers Yakov pulled out a lidded pot…

“Wow… that’s one mean looking kebab he’s cooking up…” Sam watched the tantalizingly big meat cubes being skewered and set over the coals on a makeshift rack with quiet fascination. Barton just snickered, while Steve looked a little lost.

“Nat told me about this… and it’s not a kebab…”

“Yeah?”
“Is called differently too…”

The wolves were also there: munching on some meat and bone, totally at peace. Even the injured one…

“What got him injured anyway?”

“That guy jumped on a grenade meant for James… why? I don’t know, but he did it, and that changed the tide when the other two followed his lead. Kotov was triggered, and they went hunting as a pack… like they’ve been doing it a hundred times over, you know. James covered their backs with some impressive shooting… they saved a fucking cactus!”

“Guess, they wanted to be free… what’s with the cactus, though?”

“It’s not just a cactus…” Steve laid down the binoculars to simply stretch out on the roof bed. “It was a gift… one of three.”

“Ah… the redhead weaponized one of them. One big ‘ouch’ right there…”

Steve huffed out a tired laugh.

“Big ‘ouch’ indeed…”

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“Они вернулись, Джейми (They have returned, Jamie)… я их чую (I can smell them)…” Senya was shivering, despite being submerged in hot water up to the ears. “Тони, волки… и кое-кто еще (Tony, the wolves… and somebody else)…”

“Big Brother…” James was right there with him; a reassuring presence, an island of stability… a wall between him and the trigger induced battle rage. “You haven’t met that critter… yet.”

“Интересный? (Is he interesting?)”

“More like intimidating… like that Drill Sargent I had during basic: he didn’t even need to yell, because all he had to do was look… gave me the willies…” Barnes kept it light… well, as light as he could. “But that one took the cake…”

“I never understood why…”

“Why what, doll?”

“The shouting… never worked for me…”

“Oh, disclosing company secrets, are you?”

That earned him a wobbly smile and a snarky:

“Wish better…”

James kissed the nape of his neck, an inch below the mark. Another wave of shivers rocked Senya’s frame, making him arch back: under his hands, open to touch and to caress… offering himself… a small death to replace the big one…

Who would’ve thought he would be breathing thanks to exactly three things: his awesome soulmate, their bond and… semantics.
Kill James Buchannan Barnes.

Yeah, as many times as you want… and, boy, does the serum give your stamina a boost or what? Sunny was a wildcat between the sheets on normal days, but the triggers made him outright vicious… they nearly broke the bed and it was designed with the Hulk in mind.

James wasn’t complaining, though. His flame needed an outlet, so he’ll play the role… the rest? He’ll heal from the rest… hail freakin’ Hydra.

Senya had the body of a dancer: wiry muscle under smooth skin, cat-like grace and iron control… a male version of Natalia Romanoff, only better… always better…

…and James hated that dame with a well masked passion. He couldn’t really tell why, because there was no rational explanation. Just his instincts screaming ‘THREAT’ in big block letters each time as much as her smell lingered in the air…

Enough! No strangers in the bedroom… not now, not ever…

They made love to each other in that swimming pool Hulk called a bathtub and for the first time in who knows how many hours it didn’t resemble senseless animal rutting. It was James soothing away the shivers with gentle touches and butterfly kisses and Sunny purring under his care…

Tigers are cats too.

Someone up there in the real world must have had perfect timing (or an AI spying on everybody to get updates from), because his phone started showing signs of life only when they relocated to the bedroom. That airfield size bed… love at first sight!

Senya found the beeping menace first.

“Слушаю? (I’m listening?)”

“Sunny! You’re alive!” Tony’s overly cheerful cry made him wince… and put the mobile on speaker. Barnes, who was playing the big spoon, hid his smile in his mate’s hair…

“A plane crash couldn’t kill me and you thought this could? Не смеши меня… (Don’t make me laugh…)”

“See that, Snowflake? Our baby is fine…”

“So it would seem…” the other male voice was unfamiliar, the subtle accent coloring the English reminded Kotov of home he barely remembered… and both of them recognized the tone: distinctive, demanding, pushing you to the limits you didn’t know were there… the whisper of survival.

"I feel like I should show some respect, but I don't have the strength to do it…"

"Your fella wear you out, J. B. ?" Tony was smirking; you could practically hear it in his voice. "Or you're just too sore to move?"

"Ha! Jealousy is a sin, didn't you know?"

"Oh sodd off! If my sex life was as kinky as yours is, I would've been broke!"

The former Soldiers shared a look.

"Как это вообще связано? (Where is the sense in that connection?)"
"Beats me…"

Laughter: Tony’s… and that other man’s, who they both knew… and didn’t.

"You should come out… we saved you some shashliki."

"But it was a challenge! The furries got themselves hooked on Snowflake’s cooking… don’t have any room to judge them, though, being an addict myself. Sugarplum is absolutely godlike with eatable substances, let me tell you…"

Yakov just shrugged. He was a man of many talents, no need to be humble about it. But these were little things, and they needed to concentrate on the big ones…

“James?”

“Yes?”

“Report…”

“Whew… pushing me under the bus here much? Anyways, here we go…” James closed his eyes shut, took a few deep slow breaths and slipped into what he called his ‘sniper mindset’. “Miss Friday told you already about the simultaneous attack from five different directions… smart move… didn’t turn out like they wanted it to. My best hunch - they expected a bloodbath from these animals… the wolves just scared the people into running away in panic thus triggering all the security protocols into activation. They passed all your security, Tony… didn’t even need to hack into anything, had the keys right there. We were in the shop watering the plants, when they stumbled upon Protocol ‘Perimeter’… for that one they needed heavy duty weaponry to break through. When the doors finally opened, we were ready for them… what we weren’t ready for was the sheer number of them.”

“How many?”

“Fifty-seven souls.”

“… hm.”

“Yeah, I thought that too… good thing that ‘Perimeter’ had a second phase. Your armors, Tony, they’re something else… how did you teach them to fight like that?”

“That’s the fun part, Barnes… I didn’t,” Tony was in mechanic mode, if you take in his voice alone. “Friday was created as a combat interface… initially. Much later she evolved into this strapping sassy personality we all love and respect today… including one omnipresent Mister D.”

“So that was all Friday in those armors?!”

“Her combat protocols. The bulk of her attention was, as you may have guessed, in a whole different place.”

“Building Big Bro a new arm.”

“Nah, building was the easy part. Repairing the already existing damage – that’s what got my knickers in a twist… and Friday’s too, by proxy,” they heard Tony smile that humorless smile that made both of them ache for the man. “Might have made a small medical revolution in the process… so my baby girl kicked some ass?”
“To put it mildly,” James snuggled closer to his flame; Sunny snuggled back in return. “The bulky black one was the first to go down… the first one you built from rocket parts? Then they destroyed the silver one…”

“The Mark 2,” Tony sighed. “My second… didn’t have any weapons on it.”

“Caused some pretty sweet damage, even without the guns… The other armors tag-teaming them was the reason they activated the Words… wanted to turn the tide…”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then don’t…”

“Kotya?”

The redhead just squeezed his hand in silent permission, and James had to take a stabilizing breath once again.

“It was like being in the middle of a wildfire… blind panic, dark terror, excruciating pain – and you’ll do anything to escape, tear down anything standing in your path… you can’t control it, you can just point it in the right direction… they tried. But instead of one berserk they got two…”

“You shared it,” it wasn’t a question, rather a statement. James found himself nodding.

“Yes. I just opened all the gates, doors and windows and let it flood me, while pushing parts of my sanity in the bond for Kotya to take… in these moments we were one like never before. We pulled through, but the intensity of it all nearly overwhelmed me…”

“Starting to regret it?”

“Never! They just don’t tell you about these things in school when they teach you to respect your elders and shit…”

“Yeah, they just have sex-ed now… and then wonder why modern kids are so below average… so it was the reverse psychology type of brainwashing, huh. Can’t make Sunny lively, so let’s turn him into a bomb…” Tony was rambling, slipping out of ‘the mechanic mode’ and further into ‘the mad genius at work mindset’. “B.A.R.F. never dealt with memories of trigger words you don’t remember before, but… I have some neat ideas cooking up and all of them involve J. B., as sound-minded as we can help him be… unfortunately.”

“O-kay… what would you have me do?”

“You’ll be his stabilizer. When we teach the system the ropes about Sunny, we’ll have to use that evil book at least once… with Snowflake I wasn’t afraid, but I have no idea how Senya will react to strangers in the room.”

They liked the finality: no ‘would be’ or ‘could be’… problem found - problem solved.

“We really don’t deserve you, Antosha…” Yakov sensed it too.

“Damn straight you don’t, but guess what… I don’t deserve you guys either, so… here we are! Time to work with it…”

The rest drowned in the delicate clicking of keyboard keys… a continuous, almost melodic sound… like waves licking at the shore…

Soothing… that was the word he was looking for. Senya returned to purring… normal human’s
weren’t supposed to be able to, but his soulmate was anything but normal… and by this point James wouldn’t have anybody else…

Chapter End Notes

Just occurred to me that we have no reference to what our beloved Senya looks like...
So here) this was originally a fan-art to a Russian book series by Olga Gromyko called 'Космо…олухи'(Cosmo…fools) - a very light and funny reading, sadly not translated into other languages(( but... again once I saw this it was like... ping! that's what he may have looked like...
http://i.imgur.com/dCPNVTe.jpg
https://i.imgur.com/lAcNVE2.jpg (the one with the pony-tale ;))
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Ty Stone strikes back!
And Fury was always a sucker for all things alien...
(We've watched 'Captain Marvel', so we know why...)

Tony, in the mean time, uncovers something knew about his better half...
... and Steve is soul-searching still.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter) partly introspective, partly not...
feedback is nice, so if you notice any mistakes - point them out to correct)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The following month kept them on their toes: SI business, Avengers business, construction business, even an animal services representative paid a visit. On top of this Yasha needed to fly to Moscow to get his papers sorted out: citizenship, passport… the whole shebang that was needed to be recognized as a living breathing person nowadays.

Naturally, Tony clawed out some free time to go with him. Turned out a bit more exciting than he thought it would be, because they shocked a hell lot of people when Yakov named his birthdate at the registration desk. As a result they had to spend several hours in the most breathtaking archive Tony’s ever seen: sorting through boxes of papers, searching for his Soldier’s birth certificate… or any other legal document that could prove his identity. They found a hell lot of things too…

They found his dad’s military record (and damn the man was a general?!), his mom’s university papers… even his grandfather’s thesis drafts! The man was old school - to the point of drawing little sketches of flowers and plants on the margins of the pages he wrote on.

“Well, can you draw, Snowflake?” asked Tony, admiring what looked like an orchid on one of the yellowed pages, nearly transparent due their old age.

“A little… it’s been a long time, though. And you?”

“I could easily draw you the layout of any aircraft of your choosing in schematics, but that smartass who called me ‘The Da Vinci of my time’ clearly has never seen me doodle…”

“Oh?”

“Stick people, darling… nothing more, nothing less.”

Then they stumbled upon the military records of one private Zimin. It had a decently done photo in it, enough for facial recognition. The strict looking old lady with glasses with lenses that could have
fitted some microscopes Tony had seen grudgingly let them borrow the precious folder for the time of the document crafting process... which was unusual, really. Yakov confirmed his suspicions by saying:

“We should buy her flowers on our way back... or a box of good chocolate.”

“She won’t get in trouble, will she?”

“She is the Archive Chief, therefore the highest ranking official here, so I doubt it. But, despite my case being somewhat special, documents of any merit usually do not leave this building... against regulations, you see.”

“Ah! A little polite gesture... like me buying Pepper killer stilettos.”

Yakov quirked a corner of his lips in a meaningful half-smile.

“Yes. Do you want to read it?”

“Already did,” Tony touched the frame of his distinctive shades with a pseudo-casual gesture and a barely there grin. “Hydra wrote something about forty confirmed kills... why did your superiors decrease the number to... fifteen, seriously?”

The half-smile morphed into a half-smirk, wintery blues suddenly hollowing out, turning into pools of liquid death... a look the engineer hadn’t seen on his soulmate before. And the bond felt like iced over barbed wire wrapped around his wrist... then it hit home: he never experienced Yasha hate... truly hate... somebody before. So he took off his glasses and silently handed them over. A flash of gratitude... and a new discovery: red suited them both.

“Me and Major Baranov... we started our teacher-student relationship on the wrong foot. He was the leading instructor on the courses I was assigned to finish before they let me on an actual battlefield, you see. The man served as a sniper in the Winter War of 1939-1940 and even got a medal out of it... killed three people with one bullet.”

That made Tony’s eyes widen a fraction, but he listened on.

“Shots like these...They are relatively rare, because are done either out of desperation or by chance... never because they were planned. If you heard him, you would’ve assumed him this hot-blooded patriot with nerves of steel, lying in wait for days on end, without sleep, food or water, enduring subzero temperatures - all for the sake of that perfect moment... the younger ones ate that bullshit with a spoon... I didn’t and soon became his worst student.”

“Afraid of a little competition, was he...”

“I was a Siberian hunter, dusha moya. More often than not one shot determines will your family have meat on the table or will they have to settle for plain porridge with an occasional carrot in it. In winter forests sound travels far, so if you shoot and miss you’ll give away your location to every animal in the vicinity... so you learn not to miss.”

“Huh. Hunting people wasn’t all that different for you then...”

“The army desperately needed heroes, so they made them where they could. Military propaganda did little in my case, but when a boy nearly drowned, because he was ‘waiting for his perfect moment’, something had to change...” Yakov fell silent for a few moments and Tony didn’t push; they were slowly walking down the street towards what looked like a small café. He really needed to start learning his Russian, because without Fri he couldn’t even tell what the place was named after.
“Two weeks isn’t enough to train a good sniper… two weeks isn’t enough to train a good anybody. Major Baranov could offer them empty platitudes, I, on the other hand, could provide them with lessons learned from experience… telling stories by the fire, was a common practice then, and I had quite a lot to tell, being the oldest one there…”

“Oh, Snowflake…”

“We will never know,” he suddenly smiled; a flash of teeth in a brief crazy grin, blink and you’ll miss it. “And it was not forty… in truth, it was two hundred and forty. Those times were the times they actually saw me leave… and lost men trying to follow.”

Tony felt like cooing (Snowflake is such a good boy! yes, he is!), which was… okay, it was strange, but the barbed wire encircling his wrist was only just surrendering its icy hold, and he always liked poking danger in the nose…

“Come here, let me pet you.”

Red tinted lenses rolled down that beautiful nose, curious blue eyes peeked out…

“Pet me? Now that is just sad…”

“What saddens you, buttercup? Specifically…”

“That petting me is all you want to do… do you realize the last time we had sex was in Seva’s house?”

That made the genius freeze, brows furrowed. Damn… Yasha was right!

“Why would we do such a thing? I long for you, baby, all the time…”

“Stress, probably. Our vacation was a catastrophe, then you had to rebuild me, then our home got blown up…”

“Good point. Once we get home we’re correcting this little misstep - marathon style!”

The barbs eased some more, flickers of familiar warmth seeping through.

“All we have is our tent – some heavy maneuvering will be in order, my sunshine.”

“M-m, maneuvering…” Tony gave his amused companion a leer. “Also sleeping on hard surfaces is doing wonders for my back…”

“We’ll fix that…”

“The sleeping bag situation – yeah, but my age isn’t going anywhere… sadly. That serum Doc cooked up to help me live through the surgery? Only took away a few year worth of wear – a speck of dust in grand scheme of things…”

They entered the café. The coffee was good, the cake that went with it – fantastic.

The Soldier was eyeing the streaks of grey in his mate’s hair with an unreadable expression while sipping his tea… and the genius could tell, no bond needed, that the man didn’t feel the taste. Tony just smiled back with that little bittersweet smile that tugged the corner of his lips up, but never reached the eyes…

With so much good happening around (and all the bad), it was fairly easy to forget the years they
lost… twenty-something odd years wasted, because he gave up on his light, and got hit by the other end of the proverbial stick for it – and got his light carved into his chest, quite literally. What a sign of bloody karma…

“If you’re thinking about what I think you’re thinking, then don’t…”

“If we die, we die together, Antosha… till the end.”

“You saying such things make me want to invent a time machine…”

Brows shot up in surprise.

“Whatever for?”

“Why to swoop in to save you of course! Would’ve been your knight in shining armor, you know…” the engineer’s smile turned teasing between one bite of cake and the next. “But I get this tingly feeling you would have shot me the moment I stepped out of the suit…”

“Maybe… or I would have gotten curious and held that shot for better times…” Yakov teased back in his own morbid way that got Tony all excited. “But because it is you we are talking about, you most likely would have ended up stranded in the middle of the 1941 East European front knee deep in snow with both Russians and Nazi’s on your back…”

“That’s… oddly detailed for something thought up on a whim. Have you been thinking about the possible variants of us meeting?”

“I have wondered, yes.”

“Oh, this should be interesting…”

“Indeed. You finding me would have been a problem, even with the suit’s capabilities: no camera feeds, no space satellites, no Internet. You could have hacked into radio transmissions: Soviet and German alike… have you mastered any of these languages when you chose to time travel?”

“Hypothetically speaking, let us assume that I did.”

“Good. But you would need to be careful still and not speak much…”

“…the accent?”

“Yes. You don’t need the fame of being hunted down like a foreign spy, after all.”

“Well, that’s certainly optimistic… where were you in 1941, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“In Sevastopol. The city was under siege. We held out for almost a year… I remained to cover the retreat, a rifle and a few tins of bullets - my only company. They had to level a city block to make me stop…”

“You most likely would be wounded and unconscious, so they would need to transport you somehow… the suit is too flashy, so I would need to improvise. Would it be a truck? Yeah, it would be a truck… good thing I don’t have enough conscience to feel guilty for killing bad guys anymore.”

“And so we found ourselves facing the second problem: you making me believe you.”

Tony tsked:
“Just flashing the armor wouldn’t work, would it?”

Yakov answered with a smile.

“No, probably, not.”

“A hard bargain you’re driving here, buster.”

“But, putting sanity issues and the utter bizarreness of the situation aside, I would have still remained to keep you safe… this war we were fighting… it would have been a bad place for you. And we would have needed to wait for the Americans to arrive, the younger version of your father and the Captain included…”

“Now that would have been a ball, but… no. Saving Bucky would have been more practical, because we would’ve known where the 107th would be… me being from the future and all.”

“We would have put an end to Zola, freed James and waged war against Hydra on the side of, what you may have called them, the good guys. Rogers would be happy with your father, James would be alone and we both would die of old age: first me, then him. You, though, will never be born…”

“… yeah, I guess, that’s true. Maybe dad and Steve would decide on a kid someday? Always a possibility…”

“That won’t be you, solnyshko.”

Tony considered it for a second and nodded:

“Yes, it won’t.”

***

A call from Pepper caught them in the airport.

“Pepper! Apple of my eye!” Tony couldn’t help but sound surprised, simultaneously going through his mental list of things that he needed to do, but maybe didn’t… and nope, he’s done them all. “So… unexpected to hear you? Not this soon… I swear it was just a box of chocolate and some flowers, no scandal whatsoever.”

“Tony, I have… news,” his former assistant didn’t rise to the bait… which was strange. Not even a sigh of exasperation! Beside him Yakov picked up on the changes too, if the slight tilt of his head to the side was any indication.

“Bad news or good news?”

“Just… news. SHIELD canceled their contract with Stark Industries. You are not consulting them anymore… and must leave the Compound. They also moved Ironman to the ‘helpers’ roster with Strange and Spiderman.”

Yeah, he gifted that piece of property to the Avengers Initiative some time ago. Who knew! The ‘helpers’ roster, though? Is that what that thing is called? Kinda lame…

“Cancel the reconstruction works, pay the teams the money we owe them for the work already done with a 5% bonus and apologies… if they want it fixed, they’ll have to do that themselves. Also prepare the move according to Exodus Protocols.”
“Done… and done.”

A flash of curiosity from Yasha’s side, then his quiet question:

“…Exodus Protocols?”

“Yeah, a set of procedures I never used… seemed appropriate, because this is no temporary leave, Snowflake. And we’re taking not only our stuff with us, but Fri’s servers as well… could really use an abandoned non-Hydra bunker right about now…”

The Soldier answered with a contemplative hum.

“I will see what I can remember…”

Tony leaned in and kissed the star on his metal shoulder. Together till the end.

“And the other news, Pep? My genius intuition tells me that there are more.”

“SHIELD must have pulled some strings in the military… I’ve been receiving notifications about canceled contracts from that direction all morning.”

“How many?”

“All of them,” Pepper fell silent for a few moments. “What remains are the maintenance programs, but I have a feeling that we will be kicked out of there soon too.”

“… and who are they replacing us with?”

The silence on the other end of the side of the phone acquired a steely edge.

“Viastone.”

Emptiness and dread… welcome back.

"I'll look into it."

When the call ended and Tony hid the phone in the inner pocket of his Tom Ford jacket, the urge to simply smash almost took his sensibilities away. He was grateful his light let him simmer with rage, if only for a bit… let it out before it broke him.

"The Tower?"

"Only because everyone expects me to live there. Have only myself to blame… and maybe my ego."

"I heard you had to rebuild."

"And half of Manhattan with it. Billionaire, remember?"

"Because you have the money doesn't mean you have to do everything yourself."

"Well, it was our first full-scale alien invasion, sugarcake. Logistics were nill… had to organize a relief fund… either way, I poured my personal savings into this shifty love affair, never touched a dime of company money."

Yakov turned contemplative again. You could practically see the gears of thought shifting. Something was about to happen…
"This predicament... How will it affect SI?"

"It survived me shutting down the weapon manufacturing lines - and that made two thirds of our income at the time. My little side projects, like the Stark phone, new and improved solar panels, a better and improved body armor (Afghanistan taught me a valuable lesson) were the only thing that kept us afloat... I kept inventing, Pepper kept promoting my ideas among the worlds finest, and we made it. Now, though, we are getting pushed off the market entirely..."

"You limit your trade of military equipment to the state military. Why?"

"Howard wanted it that way. Our boys must have the best sticks... or so he said," Tony looked up at the big screen with incoming and leaving flights, skimmed through the lines of code-like messages. "You know, I think we missed our ride..."

Yakov followed his line of sight, and shook his head.

"No, it is delayed. Apparently, somebody notified the authorities about the bomb in the plane’s luggage compartment..."

"Whoa there!" the genius dived after his phone lightning fast; nimble fingers dancing over the sensor screen, already in search... and hacking into the airport CCTV feed and computers. "Do they need help?"

"They called bomb squad," the Soldier tilted his head to the side in a much more noticeable manner, listening into a conversation far away. "And say it looks strange... glowing purple and with a lot of glass parts."

He hacked into the bomb squad’s personal cameras after that and they saw what that guy saw. Purple glow, glass parts... crystals? But... bomb? Why would someone name this a bomb and not a magic artifact for example? It had the looks for it...

Tony frowned and zoomed in, noticing the thin metal cables, connecting the crystals, small metal plaques resembling circuit boards linked together by metal rings, almost like flower petals...

A beautiful blooming glowing flower... he could even see the ripples in the purple hue: center – sides, center – sides... each pulse coming sooner than the other, shortening the intervals between... like a timer and if that’s a timer, then the flowery thing...

...is, most likely, a mine.

“... well, shit... we need to get out there...”

“Solnyshko?”

“That’s alien tech, Yasha. Chitauri or based on Chitauri, but either way...”

“... they don’t know how to disarm it.”

It was an easily made decision from that moment on: they ditched their luggage, and Tony followed his soulmate’s lead. The crowd, simple bystanders and reporters together, trying to push past the yellow crime scene tape and the stone-faced police officer, cell phones at the ready, was hard to miss. For Yakov, though, it parted like the Red sea in front of Moses... and that was Tony’s que to jump in...

The police guy turned out to be not so stone-faced after all. The phrase ‘I know what the bomb is’
worked wonders. Next step: alert D and his team. While they made their way to the one empty airstrip, where the plane was kept, void of passengers, thank Christ, Tony was furiously typing: descriptions, ideas, observations (his company utilized alien remains and remnants of alien tech after New York, sure, but studied them too to a degree)…

D answered with a laconic ‘Understood. ETA – 10 minutes’.

“If he thinks we’ll survive ten minutes, he must really believe in my skill…”

“Is he wrong?”

“Well… no?”

“Then it is settled.”

***

They find out about it like regular people do – via TV screen. A bomb in an international airport in Moscow! Then the camera zooms in… and Clint chokes on his fries.

They see the familiar figures of the Defenders: Haar and Anwar, Khan and Katerina. The former stood at Tony’s side, watching the billionaire tear apart his Ironman armor and using the parts to build… something, painted in ominous reds and oranges of D’s holograms. The latter along with Yakov prowled the area in a search for clues. Colonel Zateinik was also present - talking to the police and what looked like local detectives.

“I thought they went there to get some papers sorted!” Sam could only stare.

“Guess, you were wrong,” Nat was as calm as ever.

“Why is there no call to assemble?”

“Guess we weren’t invited.”

“Gee, Nat, you’re such a ray of sunshine…”

The Widow had the audacity to look smug.

Steve just frowned, keeping his silence. He hadn’t told the team yet – didn’t know how to phrase that… information Director Fury dumped on him the other day, when he stopped the super-soldier on his way back from his morning run. They had a new consultant now… and it wasn’t Tony Stark. He should be happy – he didn’t need to see that insufferable mug anymore, but at the same time he couldn’t help but wonder… Tony’s the best in the field, why the heck replace him? Something smelled fishy, and Steve decided to keep his eyes peeled… the government already tricked them once.

“What is he making? Looks like a net of some kind…”

“I believe Sir is making an energy dampener,” Vision was eyeing the TV screen with avid curiosity. “Fascinating, but I doubt the power provided by the suit's miniature reactors would suffice for what he might be planning.”

“Viz, simple words, please.”

“If the ‘bomb’ is powered by energy, taking away that energy will most likely disarm it… or trigger it.”
"No, it won't…" Bucky's voice, unexpected and so close he could have ruffled Clint’s hair if he wanted too, made them jump. Even Nat, who usually heard everything: from mice to ghosts.

James wasn’t smiling, though. He obviously heard the news.

"Oh?"

"What makes you so sure, Barnes?"

"It’ll drain ya faster than a night on the town… if you’re flesh’n’blood original earthling. All things mechanical die in 0.3 seconds flat."

“Jesus… why build such a thing?”

“Our enemies have energy based weaponry, voobshe-to (kind of). So Stark made an anti-grenade… and why the long faces, people? If you have time to brood, there are plenty potatoes to peel in the kitchen… Kotya told me manual labor relaxes the mind.”

“Your Kotik (little cute cat) is full of shit, Barnes…” Clint scowled at him. James sneered right back.

“Brave when he’s not around, ain’t’ ya, Barton?”

And Steve, mildly taken aback by the sudden display of hostility, had to wonder: was it his time in prison that made him this way… or was this part of his best friend always there, but hidden away?

He tried asking once. Kotov’s retaliation strike had been swift… and potentially deadly. Nope, he didn’t booby-trap the stove or anything – the man went after his art supplies instead, lacing his pencils, art books, paint brushes and paint bottles with a tricky sort of liquid explosive that is dangerous only when combined. If not for his enhanced sense of smell he would have missed it… and blew himself up while mixing paint. Later, when the shock wore off, Steve realized the protective Russian was right - Bucky will tell him when he’s ready.

“Where is he, though? It’s nearly time for our walk-down-memory-lane session…” Sam slipped into his ‘therapist’ mode.

James’s answering smile was tired.

“About that… you’ll need to commute to the Tower for those from now on. All the B.A.R.F.-gear had been moved there before the Hydra attack, so Tony’s just moving out the rest. Kotya and the Brothers Grim are already scoping out the new location…”

“Hard to consult, when you’re half a city away,” noted Clint, all earlier animosity gone.

“Oh, you haven’t heard? SHIELD fired him… and hired some shifty pencil-pusher in his stead.”

All eyes turned to Steve, and for the Captain it was like he was in that bunker all over again, with Tony’s voice ringing in his ears…

Did you know?

“Yeah, Fury told me… yesterday. Didn’t tell me who, though.”

“I guess, we’ll have to find out, you know, the hard way…”

***
James was packing.

Funny, but even after all this time his belongings still fit into one duffel bag. The Sargent couldn’t help but smirk at the color choices: utilitarian black with dashed of red, dark-blue and soft brown… ‘The Soldier’ written all over it. James found he didn’t mind – the days when he loved being the center of attention were long since gone.

Tony, of course, noticed, and they were given a limitless credit card and an explicit order to go and brighten up. Luckily for them, Sunny actually had a knack for modern fashion…

“So, you’re leaving too?” the sadness in his childhood friend’s voice was almost palpable.

“Yeah, but I need you to know, punk, it has nothing to do with you being, well, you,” another set of T-shirt went in, neatly folded. “They didn’t earn it, Stevie… that’s the thing.”

“And people in this time say trust overrated,” Rogers lowered himself on his best friends bed, absentmindedly admiring the softness of the covers.

“Good thing, we’re not from around here then,” James kept his tone light if a bit cocky; didn’t reach his eyes… Steve found this extremely unnerving. “What’s on your mind, tho’? I can practically hear the gear turning.”

“Do you have to leave?”

“Well, this building is ‘Avengers only’, so if you’re not a member of the Initiative - no rooms for you. Director Eye-patch made this crystal clear on this morning’s employee meeting… Miss Friday keeps us posted about changes she thinks are important…”

“You could join, you know.”

“I’ve had enough fightin’ to last me a decade, thank you, and even if I did join, Senya would have had to apply as well… and I would never make my flame that miserable.”

“Oh…”

“Don’t have to act all subdued on me, Stevie,” this time the smile did reach his eyes, and it was glorious. “I reckon you want to ask something personal… I’m right or am I right?”

And just like that the legendary Captain America went all shy as a daisy, fighting a furious blush and failing spectacularly. Steve Rogers – the man with his heart on his sleeve! James shook his head, only mildly amused, because there was only one topic that had the power to turn Cap into a hopeless babbling mess…

Girls…

…and the fondue-thing.

“Buck?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it any different… to fall in love with a man?”

That made James stop and look at him, his duffel forgotten.

"...it’s about Howard, isn't it?"
"Yeah, an’ if I don’t talk to somebody about this, I think I’m going to explode…” Steve squeezed his eyes shut for a second, gathered his somewhat shaky resolve together. "I’ve talked to… to Yakov about it. It is like two different people: the Howard we remember and… Tony's da. I wrecked my brain trying to understand how one turned into the other… and just can’t!"

Well, wasn’t that a loaded question… statement… confession? James frowned.

"People change, Steve. In his case though, personally, I think it was the uncertainty that did him in…"

"The uncertainty?"

"Put yourself in his shoes for a minute. You go on your last mission, crash your plane in the Arctic and disappear. Everyone tells him you’re dead, but he looks at his mark and it shows no signs of fading, so he tells the world to go fuck themselves, and continues searching. Now the world thinks him crazy, but he doesn't care. It can't go on for long, because Howard Stark has a business to run, for one, and is all about appearances, secondly… So he gets married to a beautiful woman, the cream of the high status society, and covers his mark, because, for him, it tastes too much like betrayal. Time passes, his searches are fruitless and his marriage? Any feelings that were there in the first place, died long ago, and the only place where he truly come alive – is his workshop. Then Tony is born, because between a man and a woman sleeping together things like these tend to happen… and like any kid he starts doing things to catch his da’s attention or approval, which just irks the man into disliking him more until that turns into something dark an’ twisted…"

"Jesus, Buck, all this is my fault…"

"Hush it, punk, because it really isn’t… you were an icicle, for Christ's sake! What he did, was all on him…”

"Yakov told you too?"

"No, it’s a bit complicated to describe, but we share about two thirds of our memories, so I know, because he knows and we saw it happen together one through the other… if that makes sense to you," James paused. "You know, Tony went through nearly the same thing, when they froze us for twenty odd years…"

"So all that filth the media has on him became possible because of this?"

"I don't know… maybe?"

"Mhm…"

"Funny that you aren't asking about Yakov: was he honest or just yanking your chain?"

"He didn't strike me as a person who will lie… not about this."

"You're right,” James stifled a snicker. "Tony is his precious…”

"Oh, don’t you start! How he manages to rein all that bursting nuclear fusion in is beyond me!" Steve's answering smile was genuine, if a bit wobbly.

"Stevie, this just means you know nothing about women…”

“You mean, men.”
“…whatever. But concerning your original question: no, it’s not different at all.”

Chapter End Notes

The State Archive of the Russian Federation) strikes fear in you, honestly, but our boys are brave, so they went there anyway X)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/05/GARF_1.jpg/800px-GARF_1.jpg

Are there any coffee-shops or diners in the vicinity? Don’t know, but at the same time... why not?))
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

They lost a plane, but saved an airport...
Their return on US soil is quiet...
... and yet the Soldier is starting to realize that they are pushed to fight a war before
*the* war...

Chapter Notes

Watched the Avangers: Endgame... well, among the feelings of sadness, excitement, awe
(Thor in his new get-up got me thinking about those beer-loving dwarves... must be the
beard X)) and epic, I was left with a feeling of emptiness... something in me died along
with Tony Stark(0oO
This aside, though, some notes on Russian idioms) the phrase 'staring at smth like a ram
at a pair of new gates' basically means 'staring at something you've never seen with a
O.O expression'. In some ways could be similar to 'freeze like a deer in the headlights',
but depends on the context...

If you spot anything out of order, let me know)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His sunshine was tireless in his creation haze: saw the materials, saw the means… saw the endgame.
The device he built from scraps yet again bore the proud name of ‘Flytrap’, was heavily inspired by
radio-frequency dampeners and who knows what else. They learned not to comment. Well, Russians
always had a tradition of giving stupid names to their deadliest weapons - a self-propelled mortar
called ‘Tulip’ was just one fine example of many…

“If our A-plan doesn’t work and this thing does go off, you’ll have to contain the explosion,
Anwar…”

The geomancer is calm and collected when he asks:

“How strong?”

The smile he gets resembles a grimace.

“This should’ve been the moment where I look all smart and throw some numbers your way, but
we’re honest here, so I’ll just say I don’t know. What I do know is that it has to be something able to
cripple a plane this size… oh… okay…”

A splash of anxiety in the bond, and the Soldier is on alert instantly. Nightmare induced panic attacks
were unwelcome guests in their home still… the only place where Yakov could not follow.
“Antosha…”

“It just occurred to me, Snowflake, that this whole set up resembles an assassination attempt. Imagine what would’ve happened if the plane blew up somewhere over the Atlantic, with us and another hundred or so people on board? My point exactly, a tragedy…”

Haar’s expression turned dark, while Anwar’s acquired certain sharpness to it. Understandable, because a mere fortnight ago they visited New York, acting as silent support for one shy professor who decided to risk it... and, maybe, walk again. No super-soldier serum to cure the incurable, just baseline human – Tony’s first human trail. His nanobots passed it with flying colors, fixing the long ago broken spine good as new, under the watchful eye of one Doctor Helen Cho…

Tony was beaming. He was the man that fixes things, after all.

“If this was planned, why call the authorities?”

“Who says it was the same guy?”

And wasn’t that an interesting question, and they will give it the attention it deserves, only... later, when they have disabled the mine.

“You have a plan, Master Anwar?”

“One way to call it... bring me the black box if you please, Haar.”

“Are you sure? That sand nearly did you in when you tried to use it last time…”

“Trouble times require special measures, my friend.”

“If you say so…”

The bear-shifter’s displeasure was evident, even if he did go to the few crates of equipment they did bring with them to the scene. Tony’s response to the little spectacle was a quizzically raised eyebrow…

Yakov will tell him, later, even if he did not think himself knowledgeable in such a delicate subject as the Mystic Arts. Not his area of expertise, but when you live that close to nature as he and Haar did, you cannot help but notice things: animals favoring some places more than others, drinking from some streams while avoiding the others, particular herbs that cure aches better than modern medication, the strange voices in the wind you cannot help but hear on moonless nights…

There was a different world in the forests at the foot of the Altai mountains, on the shores of the Baikal lake. Savage, yet fair…

The soviet ideology taught you about the new industrial world and the triumph of man over nature. Hypocritical. He left that nonsense behind the moment his child-self left the school grounds. He did well in class, so his teachers had nothing to complain to his parents about. His peers, though, kept their distance as if sensing in him a part of that wilderness their parents tried to conquer with fire and machines…

He was alone and he liked it that way.

Yakov knew that father understood - he could see it in his eyes, in his words, mother, though, worried like every mother would. They found a middle ground… and took him to see a shaman. Religion was officially banned, so they could not seek advice from a priest like they normally would.
When matters of the spirit were involved, shamans were the second best replacement in these parts.

He remembered the woman being old and wrinkled, brown skin and bright eyes shining like two pieces of onyx from under black strands, braded and adorned with wooden beads and old coins, bent as an old willow tree… she didn’t meet with just anyone, choosing carefully, choosing wisely…

She took one look at him and croaked out a laugh that got his mother started and made his father frown and shift protectively.

They wolves of winter earn for you, boy… can you hear them howl?... be ready for one day… you will run with them, but… not today… not today...

Shamans often spoke in riddles. She was no different, but, for his parents, she tried… his spirit was too strong… a grown man inside a child’s body… a grown wolf inside a pup… too old for his time, born too early… something special.

“What of his soulmate?” mother just had to ask, because above all she wanted him to be happy.

“Do not worry. He would be something special too…”

Yakov remembered feeling pretty much like a ram staring at some new gates. His mate would be a ‘he’! And the same evening father set him down and they had that fateful conversation.

Anwar’s situation was different. He was not the first of his kind, like Yakov was. He was the last, and while the roots of his bloodline could be traced to the times of Ancient Egypt through the ages, that particular tree was long dead save for one little branch. All the family heirlooms (read: magical artifacts of various stages of complexity) were also his… and were not at all kind to their user, the black sand being one of the worst, seemingly having a mind of its own.

“You’ll have to tell me the story behind this someday…” Tony was eyeing the crate Haar brought with avid curiosity like he would very much enjoy poking the insides of it with a scanner. He would never, though, not without permission. His sunshine was polite like that.

“Someday, it would be a pleasure to tell, but now I am going to explain what I am doing…” the crate was opened to reveal a miniature casket carved out of a big piece of crystal. As soon as the first rays of sunlight hit the pitch-black substance slumbering within, it… shuddered. “These are the Guardian Sands. No more priests to protect, no more temples to hide, yet the name lingers. We are going to create a barrier over the airplane, and when Khan will set the net, we will close it, cutting the plane from the outside world. He will have less than a second to activate it and run. Do not worry – we have done this before.”

“Once,” grumbled Haar in the background. “And you both ended in medbay.”

Anwar just shook his head, mouthing something suspiciously resembling ‘Papa-bear’ loud enough for the others to hear. The comms erupted with laughter and teasing, making the shifter grumble even more…

The magic sand was sluggish to respond, almost unwilling. ‘I know you are my master, but I hate your guts’… right until Anwar said something in a language even more dead than Latin his mother loved so much. That made the sand pause, while it hovered like a swarm of angry bees in front of the geomancer’s face, two thirds of its body still in the box. A few moments later the angry subvocal buzz subsided, and in a matter of minutes the casket was empty, black particles finding new hiding places under the man’s extensive robes.

“We are ready to begin.”
“O-kay… I’ll just pretend that wasn’t creepy at all. The Mummy won’t be returning, I hope… or will it?”

“No, not that kind of mage unfortunately…”

“Reassuring…”

Haar’s team worked like clockwork: secure the perimeter, keep the civilians and press at a safe distance. Khan cautiously went in, ‘flytrap’ in hand, the reactors casting a reassuring blue-white glow at the black leather of his combat uniform. Anwar closed his eyes and… Yakov could have called it focus, while his sunshine would most likely utilize the word ‘trance’.

No tricks. No flashy moves. The world was watching, including the person who is responsible… the one holding the kill-switch. The Soldier could pinpoint the exact moment he decided to push it…

The explosion rocked the airport, shattering windows and bending metal doors… even weakened the shockwave did impressive property damage. The aircraft was no more, ravaged by flame, raging under the dome of black sand so thin is looked transparent.

Khan made it, but barely, appearing beside the magic user in wisps of darkish smoke. The top of his uniform was ruined, so he silently peeled it off, uncovering a simple white undershirt… and scars. Lines and lines of thin scar-tissue. His speed was not a result of a mutation, he was made that way.

“Я опоздал (I was late). Секунды не хватило (One second late)… пришлось бросать «мухоловку» в уже взрывающуюся бомбу (had to throw the ‘flytrap’ at the already exploding bomb)…”

“The plane was full of fuel… would have been four times worse,” they were joined by Colonel Zateinik, the agent looking as serious as ever. “The FSB is initiating an all-out investigation: international terrorism, assassination attempt of an American citizen on Russian soil, illegal weapon trafficking… Heads will fly. You, Mister Stark, are invited to participate - as an expert. Once the remnants of the bomb are collected, I will send them to you…”

Tony did not expect this – most of the time he had to weasel into interesting projects just like he weaseled out of boring board meetings… or organize said projects himself. No one really invited Tony Stark, because they wanted him there for his six (or was it seven?) PhD’s in engineering… most wanted him for the media coverage he could provide. Yakov saw this happen when he accompanied his sunshine to some of the functions… made him want to maim…

“Thank you, Colonel… oh, I would also like to add Doctor Stephen Strange to the investigation… him being the Sorcerer Supreme and all.”

“The Kamar Taj school?” Anwar was with them again.

“So you know him…”

“I know about him… and he took charge?”

“From what I understood, there aren’t many qualified sorcerers left in there… they are still trying to live through the fallout of their old Sorcerer’s Supreme demise.”

“Is he good?”

“Well, he was a neurosurgeon in his past life… some even called him a genius…”
“He is an asshole, solnyshko.”

“But a competent one, you’ll have to admit! He identified that double-soul thing, didn’t he?”

“Hm…”

“Translation from Snowflake-speak: yes, he *is*,” his sunshine was smiling. Mission success.

Colonel Zateinik almost smiled.

“You will need a ride home, Mister Stark. D is happy to provide.”

“I think my CEO already sent the company jet after us… but thank you for the offer! Very generous and I’m touched,” Tony looked humbled, because he didn’t expect this… again.

The agent didn’t push.

***

They recovered their luggage and settled in an empty hangar… to wait. Everyone expected them to celebrate their success in one of the airport’s coffee-shops… they showed all those who might be watching the finger by slipping away from under Big Brother’s watchful eye. And Tony got a unique opportunity to witness how his light’s master assassin invisibility *really* works. Yakov lead him through it all, generous with explanations offered in smoky whispers… a rare occasion to look behind the scene of the underground dark world, a place, which Tony never visited outside of the Ironman suit.

“Blind zones and crowd control – sounds easy enough…”

“You don’t say, dusha moya (soul of mine)…”

“What? I could totally do it.”

“Considering a career change?”

“Only if you take me as your apprentice, lover mine…”

Yakov laughed, but if the bond was any indication his Soldier was pleased.

“You, Antosha, are plenty deadly on your own, but…

“But?”

“We can make you better.”

Tony Stark – engineer, genius… assassin!

“I’d have to repaint my suit, though… red on black!” Tony made sure to add a few show-man style moves mimicking karate punches. Yakov gave him an appreciative once over, while casually correcting his stance (fists up, legs apart) and humming:

“Ominous…”

“Well aren’t you a peach, Snowflake… honest too. How about… black on red?”

“I will think about it.”
When they reached the hangar, things died down, yet the calmness wasn’t very calming, because Tony was sketching the device that almost sent them closer to the clouds and Yakov was sketching Tony… with his left hand. The emotions filling the bond from his side, in a different setting, one might have called… disturbing.

They were only human, various technological upgrades aside, therefore they feared, loved, burned in anxiety and drowned in anger… Snowflake resembled a blizzard inside, despite the slow pencil-strokes and the laconic minimalism of the composition, yet their bond never felt more alive thanks to the light agitated touches of trembling icy fingertips every two or three minutes… checking if he was still there.

“Yasha?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me a story.”

The Soldier paused, before quietly admitting what was probably his greatest secret:

“… I like plums too.”

Tony nearly dropped his phone, staring at him in shock. The way his light said it… like it was too many coincidences in one place. Name (James is Yakov, only in Russian), age, skills, eidetic memory… preferences.

“Not like James. He likes fresh ones… I like them dried.”

“But it was enough for… in other words, they needed a match: as close to the original as possible, but… whatever for?”

“The arm. They finally did something irreversible and it was killing me faster than the serum was healing me.”

The Soldier half expected Tony to jump him with less than noble intentions which involved hitting, angry growling and buckets of worry that burned like acid… and his sunshine did not disappoint. The phone and the half-finished blueprints were forgotten, and suddenly Antosha was by his side, on his knees of all things, hugging his middle…

“When I unfroze you, were you… it was bad, but didn’t seem that bad.”

“If I do not use it, then it becomes… bearable. And that century in cryo-sleep helped my body thread itself together… as best as it could.”

The hug only tightened. Standing on his knees on hard concrete wasn’t doing Tony any good, but, frankly, he was past the point of caring. There was a hand in his hair, warm and human… calloused, yet gentle… and he leaned into the touch.

“You fixed me, Antosha. I am not going anywhere…”

“… good.”

The plane arrived several hours later… in stealth mode, which was unusual, and with Rhodey in the pilot seat. War Machine made one hell of a messenger pigeon, but judging by the pissed expression he was sporting the news his Platypus brought should be, at least, interesting…
They huddled in the pilot’s cabin, where Tony took the co-pilot seat with Yakov lingering in the back, behind his right shoulder. Rhod...
“That kind of tradition then,” Yakov sounded amused. “Why the shovel though? Why not... an axe, for example?”

Rhodey looked at him with mild surprise. The Soldier shrugged.

“I had two sisters. Unfortunately, they were very beautiful, and soon mother had to chase all those boys away with a broom.”

“I hear you... had some sisters of my own. Let me guess, brooms stopped being intimidating very soon?”

“В точку (Got it in one).”

“And you pulled out the axe.”

“I’ve been told that I look very menacing when I chop wood.”

On the background Tony was trying to fight off giggles. Yasha the Big Brother was another side of his soulmate to learn... protective.

“What about your new tech guy?”

“You mean Tiberius Stone and his flee market. He is yet to show his ugly mug around me or the team, and I am almost 100% sure he didn’t invent even a microchip in the things he will be pushing onto us...”

“Why?”

“He’s a manager. Smart, sure, but give him a soldering iron and he’ll burn his hands to the bone,” Rhodey shook his hand in mild disapproval. “He tried impressing Tony with his supreme welding skills once... ended up on a hospital bed instead.”

“Дурак… (What a fool...)”

“Who is the tech expert he is working with, I wonder?”

“Something to find out...”

***

The Soldier had never been to the Tower before. He found it stylish, but impersonal. You can bring here your business partners or a one-night companion, but living in this designer handpicked aesthetic all the time? No.

Tony caught him examining the space of the living room, brows slightly raised in almost scientific interest. He even knew what he saw – glass, metal and modern art. All the things that screamed ‘rich!’ and the things Tony Stark should live among... the things that weren’t really him.

“Should’ve moved straight to the workshop, Snowflake. I spend 90% of my time there anyway...”

“And what do you do here, dusha moya (soul of mine)?”

“Shower... and sometimes sleep.”

“Sounds nice... Windows?”
“Bulletproof. But if somebody decides to crash a jet into my living room… well, for that we have
gold-titanium shielding which covers the Tower from top to bottom, turning it into a 110-story
fortress, because thanks to the arc-reactor that’s powering the building, we are completely self-
sufficient.”

“Friday is in control?”

“Yes. I don’t trust anyone else.”

“Good.”

“Should we expect other incidents like the one in the airport?”

“Most probably. We were warned about the mine by a third party… this time. Next time it would be
something else… a bomb in a coffee cup, perhaps? Very artistic.”

“Always knew my vices would be the death of me.”

“Jokes aside, my sunshine, we should be very careful and very unpredictable… if we want to live
and, supposedly, fight in that new great war everybody is talking about.”

The smile Tony answered with was wry.

“To remain a super-hero I must become a super-villain! Life sure is strange…”

“You could say it was my bad influence that did it… corruption, yes?”

“Oh, please…”

They didn’t leave the elevator, though, deciding to ignore the penthouse altogether. The workshop
was ignored as well. Unpredictable, they huddled into one of the guest suites: two bedrooms, living
room, a full stocked kitchen and a bathroom with a shower and a tub. The luggage was rather
carelessly dropped in one of the rooms, while Tony all but pulled his Soldier towards the Jacuzzi by
his shirt collar…

He had a promise to keep.

***

The bond between them filled with want and longing, heat and hunger; mulish determination mixed
into amused fondness… their unique recipe for love.

His sunshine unwrapped him like a Christmas present: the same joy, the same excitement. Yakov did
not mind. The adorable puzzlement with every new found knife sheath was like a balm to his rattled
nerves. A part of him that was Hydra, the one that craved to please his Handler no matter what,
purred from all the attention, content, perhaps, for the first time in years. A strange feeling…

What you cannot change, you’ll have to learn to accept… Tony did.

The genius urged him to climb into the hot water, while he shedded his business clothing off like a
snake sheds its old skin: jacket, tie, cufflinks, dress-shirt, simple white T-shirt, revealing the blue-
white star in the middle of a scarred chest… The Soldier watched, teeth bare in his signature wolfish
grin, his sunshine’s aroused flush his only and most precious reward, a veritable sign that he, as
damaged as he was, was enough…

The first moments were dedicated to relaxation and slow tender kisses. They floated among the
whirling waters of the tub like two lazy goldfish, letting the heat ease their tired muscles. Yakov eyed his left arm from time to time with avid curiosity, half-expecting the metal to heat up and cause him discomfort… it never did. Tony noticed, of course…and beamed.

See? I did that.

Yes, you sure did.

A few drops of fragrant oil from one of the small bottles standing on the nearby shelf, and the atmosphere in the bathroom changed, the air undertaking a light sauna like quality… the room wasn’t that big, so when the steam started gathering (and Fri kept the vents half closed just for them, clever girl) smelling lightly of pine and something woodsy, Tony felt like he could breathe again. Living almost a decade with a reduced lung capacity, he almost forgot the feeling… almost.

“Another old hunting trick, Snowflake?” the genius took another deep inhale, just because he could. Yakov, who was leaning back against the other end of the tub, head and arms resting on the edge, laughed.

“No… natural pine is just good that way, helps the lungs. Antibacterial.”

“Really?”

“Uhuh, this is why all hospital gardens in Russia consist mostly of pine trees.”

“… clever.”

“When I was young, penicillin was still a rumor, never mind other modern antibiotics, my sunshine. And the only way to try and cure tuberculosis was to travel south, to the Crimean peninsula or to Sochi and settle there for a time… sometimes it helped, sometimes not.”

“Must have been a shock to you… you know, after Irkutsk, arriving in Sevastopol. The climate change…”

“It was near winter, when we were transported there… by sea from Novorossiysk and under bombardment from German planes. The weather was way warmer than I expected… as well as the sea. No shock, though… just mild irritation, because as fast as our sniper courses were, they never taught us how to fight in the city.”

“That… sucks.”

“I had to learn… all of us had to.”

“Would you like to go there?”

“I could most certainly show you around a bit… the city no doubt changed.”

“All the better! Getting lost in a city you know is a little embarrassing…”

Was it, really? Yakov did not think so. For him, getting lost was the fun part… a thing that the war and Hydra made sure to become quite impossible. Sadness… unpleasant, like a needle driven under a nail.

“… I said something, didn’t I?” Tony felt it too.

“No, zvezdochka (little star),” Yakov was suddenly near, metal fingers stroking wet hair, nuzzling that sadness away with soft touches and loving kisses. “Not you. Never you… just an old wolf
crying over the remnants of his humanity…”

For whatever reason Tony smiled, moving closer, returning the favor on the nuzzling front… a bit clumsy, but oh so sweet! Yakov could not help a happy grumble. Caught the genius by surprise – he never heard such a sound from his Soldier before.

“Yashen’ka…”

“Funny fact, my Tosha, is that I cannot get lost anymore… literally. The compass here,” a metal finger tapped lightly against a scarred temple. “never breaks.”

“And you wish it would… sometimes…”

“Yes… like Steven Rogers denies his super-human side most of the time, I wish I could still do this.”

A secret for a secret, it would seem.

“My first reactor ran on a palladium core. The best I could do with what I could find considering… kept the shrapnel away from my heart and gave life to Mark I, the armor Yinsen and I made from rocket parts, for about 15 minutes… that’s how I escaped. Yinsen didn’t make it…” Tony took a fortifying breath. “I reconstructed the arc reactor, made it more powerful, so… more palladium in my chest.”

“Radioactive poisoning…”

“Yeah. I hid it from everyone… offended Rhodey: he thought I didn’t trust him. In truth, I was just scared, because I tried every, literally, every element in the periodic table… and nothing worked! Que SHIELD sauntering in: agent Romanoff posing as my new personal assistant, forced house arrest with Coulson for company… and Fury dumping a box of my old man’s old research on my lap,” Tony smirked. “You’ll find the answer in there, he said, I don’t know what it is, but you’ll find it. And I did… and, you know, even after all this time he still manages to mock me, like all my accomplishments aren’t worth even a scrap of his…”

Yakov was looking at the blue-white star in the middle of his sunshine’s chest with a new sort of understanding. A few more puzzle pieces fell into place.

“He studied the Tesseract… and made a new element?”

“Something like that. They didn’t have the technological means to synthesize it then, so it remained mostly on paper, but as paranoid as my father was, it wasn’t there for long. Hence the almost life size model of the 1974 Stark Expo – he masked the molecular structure of the new element among pavilions and vending carts…”

“Smart…”

“Well, no love long lost here, but… yes, he was. Saved my life, giving me a good power boost at the same time, but… that phrase he said in one of the video reels – it just doesn’t let me go…”

“Tell me?”

“What is, and always will be, my greatest creation… is you. With time I found explanations for everything, except this… he didn’t even want me, what the hell!”

“He wanted you to be in SHIELD, but he could not force you, so he made you believe that you want to be there all by yourself…”
“As his replacement?”

“Better, smarter… the future,” the Soldier fell silent for a few heart beats, before whispering against
the side of his sunshine’s neck. “And a very lonely future that would have been…”

Tony didn’t answer; just intertwined his fingers with Yasha’s and held on with all he had.

***

They had their romantic evening, though… only much, much later.

Chapter End Notes

The 'Tulip'
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/ab/ParkPatriot2015part5-54.jpg/1024px-ParkPatriot2015part5-54.jpg
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Coulson visits the VA Center, Tony and Yasha find a lead on Sunny's case...  
... and aliens attack New York again.

Chapter Notes

Hello, folks!...  
caught a cold, almost finished writing my graduation paper... nasty business >.<  
well, should probably say that this is a fictional work and no real people got hurt) if you  
spot any mistakes, please, be gentle ;)

P.S. on idiom translation... they are almost never translated word-for-word, mostly by  
association or according to what they mean)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SI specialists extracted the last of F.R.I.D.A.Y. yesterday, and they were allowed to move back in,  
for the first time in months truly alone. There was still renovation work performed here and there, but  
all in all...

Sam never felt so abandoned in his life.

Between regular missions, Hydra hunting, fund-raising events (he was starting to see that thin line  
separating actual functioning charity and 'good press' too, since the Soldier showed him where to  
look) and his work at the VA center, Wilson had a pretty packed up schedule and yet...

Friday used to send him funny bird videos when she felt like it (read: every day!). Now his phone lay  
on the bedside table miserably silent.

They didn’t talk about it, but he could tell at least some of the team felt the same. Well, maybe except  
for Nat - the legendary Black Widow was too busy spider hunting to care for such trivialities...

The guys from the VA, all of them former military, noticed something was amiss too, and Sam could  
omit and gloss over things all he wanted, but when they cornered him and asked where James and  
Sunny disappeared to, you know, point blank, he just couldn’t lie! Not to them, and while they might  
not understand the essence of Hydra, but serving as a brainwashed puppet to an international terrorist  
organization? Yeah, that was well within range even the most traumatized could comprehend...

Whatever the Soldier started on that first visit, James continued. By himself, at first, but it took  
surprisingly little time and convincing to make his Russian shadow accompany him, and soon Sam  
started noticing what he later started calling ‘the shift’ inside his head. The residents of the center  
were still wandering in the dark, scarred by war and rejection, but… something irreversibly changed.  
There was awareness in places that were empty before, people trying to live with the darkness
instead of just existing in it. Progress, one might think. Sam wasn’t so sure. The look in the veteran’s eyes – that’s what threw him off. It was the look that people got when they were making their last stand: die, but do it… die, but stop them… die, but defend them… As if they were sensing a great danger coming and closing their ranks, covering each other’s back like they would have on a battlefield. And there were no traitors here…

Not normal.

Sam was there when SHIELD decided to investigate this particular lead. With the Tower ending up a dead end, it was all they had, because the social life of one Arseniy Kotov consisted of exactly three things: the library, the VA center and the VA center garden he made a habit of tending to along with a couple of other guys who discovered a little green thumb in themselves. Nothing major: just some flower bushes of long standing and a lonely apple tree, but it gave them a hobby. Well, if the vets manned up enough to make that ‘last stand’, so could he, their doc and fellow veteran…

Agent Coulson was not impressed and plowed through him like he didn’t even matter. The soldiers, assembled in the gym, with their wheel-chairs and crutches and canes, waited in silence. Well, they weren’t silent per se: some played on their phones, some discussed the latest movie they watched, others, like Eric, who lost both legs and his armored vehicle to a tank mine, were nose deep in a books… level of acknowledgement – zero.

Coulson’s usually neutral expression transformed into a slightly confused one, and after a few more minutes of being ignored he was outright frowning.

“Gentlemen…”

The shuffling died down a little, but didn’t disappear. The playing stopped smartphones being tucked into pockets and pouches, the volume of the talks dying down, but showing no signs stopping… Eric sagely turned a new page in his book.

“Gentlemen, if you please…”

Silence. For real this time. No phones, no talks, only Eric still reading on… without really reading, because his eyes, unexpectedly sharp and attentive, were sizing Agent Coulson up. Sam was surprised, honestly, because usually Eric was the more passive of the bunch.

“Gentlemen, if I may have your attention…” Coulson paused, looking them over; sensing the strange hostility in the air. “I would like to ask you some questions regarding Mister Arseniy Kotov... and his work here.”

“Work…” Eric closed his book with an audible thump; the time for jokes has passed. “What do you mean by ‘work’, Mister…?”

“Agent.”

“…Mister Agent.”

“It’s Coulson.”

The veteran’s gaze turned sharper and more attentive at the name, and Sam started, realizing the man heard it before somewhere. Introductions were formal.

“Captain Eric Miller, US tank forces, honorably discharged,” a polite salute, fingers to brow. “I will be speaking to you on the behalf of all of us.”
“I was hoping to speak with each of your… men, Captain.”

“That would be unnecessary… and, in some cases, impossible. I was elected to represent all of us in an open voting, so either take it… or leave it.”

The frown on Coulson’s face deepened becoming almost visible. The two lesser agents, who were acting as his escort, shared a surprised look – when they came here they never expected this…

“Apologies, but I must insist…”

“A shame, Mister Agent Coulson, because they won’t be speaking to you…” Eric gave Coulson a polite smile and a curt nod, before performing a graceful 90 degrees turn and wheeling away. He stopped only by the big double doors that marked the exit to put his book back on one of the low hanging shelves; James made those, by hand which baffled many. The Russian style designs were carved in by Sunny. “As for any intimidation tactics or blackmail you might think of using… look around, sir! Do we seem like people with much to lose?”

Crutches and canes were lifted, wheel-chairs pushed into motion, and one by one the vets, hobbling and supporting each other, left the premises, leaving the agents and one speechless Sam behind.

Agent Phil Coulson turned out to be very persistent. He visited the center again and again and again, thus igniting an impromptu battle of wills. Spies would be spies, but the vets too held on with pit bull levels of stubbornness… ‘I dare you to blink!’

Then someone (read: Sam, because he wasn’t done fighting for his patients just yet…) posted the whole thing on the Internet.

The world’s VA community roared! Never going past supportive posting or comments, though, because barking at the government (especially if it was an American one) was scary business!

The Russian military vets, simple folk as they were (one might even call them old-fashioned), skipped the whole media hype altogether. They packed some food and spare clothing, booked a plane to New York and came, a group of fifteen officers: Afghanistan, Chechnya, Special Forces… and three cheery grandpas who saw that war begin and end, the storming of Berlin in the far away year of 1945 included.

Sam was shocked. And glad, because as he watched the two groups mingle, the Special Forces guys doing most of the translating (one had his left sleeve pinned and the other had that peculiar tilt in his gate that indicated him walking on prosthesis) he felt the gloom of the place fade a bit…

…reinforcements have arrived.

***

“He did what now?!” his sunshine stood up so abruptly he nearly toppled the workbench he was sitting behind, Ironman armor parts falling around him like red and gold petals, in total disarray. “That little shit!”

Day two upon their return, and day one in the Tower workshop… the Soldier wasn’t really counting. He also noticed the engineer never watched the news while tinkering nowadays (which was… wise, in a way), letting Fri monitor the situation and if something caught her eye then it was worth catching his eye and the AI was rarely wrong with her importance assessment. Yakov, though, had a slightly different approach to news reels, which he used as background noise. That never irked his sunshine, because the channels he listened to were rarely in English…
That’s how they find out – through a Russian news agency. Channels are flipped through, reports are found… and a wrench goes flying into the nearest wall, missing U more by accident than by intent. Antosha is rarely this emotional, so he saves the wrench from a collision with a tools rack without much looking away from the TV-screen and places it beside him on the floor, next to the empty tea mug. Unlike the one in the Compound, this workshop held no couches. Strictly utilitarian, which is understandable, with the penthouse one elevator ride away…

Tony freezes, startled out of the emotional storm by his little display… and then he’s laughing, a bit hysterically, but laughing nevertheless. The Soldier offers him a small smile of his own. As for other issues…

While they knew about the Hydra-hunts thanks to the info presented by Colonel Rhodes, the spider-hunt Natalia initiated all on her own was a troubling addition. And she managed to rope Agent Coulson into it as well. Or, perhaps, it was a direct order from above?

Interesting…

“I really doubt they will get anything from these people, dusha moya (soul of mine),” Yakov watched the footage of the ‘meeting’ between the agents of SHIELD and the residents of the VA center, a hint of a proud smile curving his lips; the video was obviously shot from a smartphone, uploaded online and later used by various media agencies… anonymity guarantied. “Even if they do not know anything important, it is the principle of the thing…”

“Harassing these guys further is still wrong, Snowflake… and what do you mean ‘even if…’?”

“This is the same center the Falcon works at, and the same one we brought Senya from. In their eyes, he is one of them… and James, most likely, visited every day.”

“Oh… oh,” Tony sat back down, a little confused, but mostly in the theme. “They’re stalling the investigation… on purpose!”

“Yes. So we have time to find and uncover the truth and prove Arseniy as innocent as he can become.”

“If there is anything left! You mentioned that the Program was terminated. They could have done the same with the documentation…”

Yakov shook his head.

“Groups like the one Arseniy was trained in were many and housed on different bases. He was the best out of them, but like most Hydra agents of lower class he was expendable.”

“Replacements… did they have a specific place for that?”

“Yes. Rogers burned it down.”

Tony’s shoulders sagged.

“Damn…”

“His track record with Hydra is not very good, Antosha, because he misses a lot of things… like hidden bunker doors.”

“If you’re saying what I think you’re saying…” his sunshine paused, taking in all the implications, and brightening up almost instantly; too good, too kind. “He didn’t kill them! Well, not all of them…”
who did he kill then, Yasha? He had to kill somebody.”

The Soldier snorted at the phrasing, before turning serious.

“There were always willing ones, the believers in the so called Supremacy of the German Nation… they usually got that perfected final shot. Their cryo-tubes were up top at all times, along with the wolves. Not like the ones you saw here… different.”

“Real Nazi werewolves this time around, huh… jolly jee! And if they won’t cooperate?”

“Then we will kill them all… for good this time.”

***

That plan was put on hold, however.

There were aliens in New York… again, jumping out of magic portals, convincingly impersonating a locust swarm… again, your typical Wednesday, when the vanguard of an enemy army sent ahead comes knocking…

Avengers, assemble!

***

They met them head-on: Ironman and the Winter Soldier standing side by side on top of the Stark Tower. Symbolic, one might say…

“Friday, activate Protocol ‘Iron Fortress’! Begin evacuation procedures – all top floors should be void of people ASAP… and power up the Iron Legion!” Tony was in his element; Yakov could only be proud. “Contact the police, National Guard and military – they need to keep the people safe and off the streets! Alert Doc, Underoos, the Fantastic Four… and every vigilante and Enhanced individual you can reach within city grounds – we need fighters, guys with shielding powers, healers… everybody who can help and is smart enough to stay alive while doing it!”

“Should I call the Avengers, Boss?”

“They’re in fucking Cleveland, they won’t make it…”

“…on it!”

The genius took a deep breath: in, out. Then he grinned, eyeing his Soldier with a mischievous glint in those honey-browns.

“Always wanted to do this…”

“To take command in the field?”

“A relic of my Captain America fan-boy days, I’m afraid… had enough stuffed animal toys for my very own Howling Commandoes, including a Bucky-bear! And a big aluminum cooking pot lid to replace the shield.”

The Soldier remembered how the duo was portrayed in the comic books: a burly mountain of a man draped in the colors of the American Flag and his teenage-boy sidekick… and barked out a laugh, because he also remembered James’s reaction when the first issue of the comic came out. The fun days before the Fall.
“James hated it…”

“Oh, I’ll bet… did they have something similar in the USSR?”

“Motivational and patriotic posters, mostly. ‘Motherland it calling!’ – like that…”

“Boss,” Friday chimed in. “All green on all fronts: the military and National Guard are on their way and the police are securing the perimeter of about ten blocks around the Tower! Evacuation is going according to plan. The first civilian volunteers have arrived - they will be in orange vests… oh, and I have a ping on Falcon!”

“Here?!”

“It would seem he was at work.”

“…hence, gearless.”

Not good. There was a set of spare wings here, in the Tower. SI developed them, so why wouldn’t they be? The problem – the ETA of that alien fleet: they were literally minutes away, speeding across the bay towards the city skyline!

“…no one thought about evacuating the center, did they?”

“No.”

“Well, shit…”

***

Sam wasn’t scared… just a bit helpless here and there. Like he mentioned before, he could do everything Steve Rogers could do… only slower.

The center, a building with paper thin walls in the middle of a garden, had virtually nowhere to hide in, so they didn’t bother… would only lose time maneuvering the wheel-chairs and crutches and the gym was as good place as any to stay in.

The Russians surprised him, honestly (yeah, when would they stop doing it…). When they heard the announcement on TV, the most elderly of the bunch just quirked an eyebrow and said something that was translated as ‘Oh… so the aliens are real then!’. The other veteran signed and said he wished he still had his rifle with him, so if they die, it would be in battle. Which earned him a stern “Дедушка! (Grandpa!” from Sasha, the Special Forces guy with a pinned sleeve.

Eric smiled.

“Is he always like this?”

“Yes… sadly,” suddenly Sasha smiled too; a small, fond and intimate thing. “He is all I have…”

“…sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Oh… oh! They’re not dead… the rest of the family, I mean. Children still visit, but… it is not the same, yes?”

His mark was wrapped around his neck, a mockery of a serpent tattoo disappearing under the collar of his khaki-colored T-shirt, smeared letters and sharp lines, unintelligible. Captain Miller thought about his own, a patch of shattered black letters over his right hip-bone… and agreed:
“Not the same.”

The TV went on, showing them snippets about what was going on in the city. A red and gold streak that was Ironman organized what seemed like a defense with the help from the local heroes, while the Soldier served as his eyes and ears on the ground: working with the military, police and Enhanced volunteers, building teams, appointing sectors of responsibility, instructing about possible weaknesses… a tall figure in black combat armor and muzzle, metal arm with the distinctive red star on full display, exceeding a chilly aura of danger that had little to do with him being armed to the teeth, unbothered by many astonished stares. Maybe, with him, they might stand a chance!

But then alien ships finally crossed the bay and it was 2012 all over again with one Sam Wilson stuck right in the middle...

…just great.

***

Snowflake said they should be unpredictable. Well, mused Tony, you can’t possibly get more unpredictable than this…

He was currently speeding through a crumbling megalopolis in a high jacked minivan while simultaneously flying his armor through a head-set and coordinating several hero-teams, who weren’t all that cooperative, mind you. Especially the Fantastic Four. God, how he wanted to beat Reed Richards with a stick!

…later. He would beat him up later. As for now he kicked the van into a higher gear, trying to make this hunk of Mercedes junk move a bit faster.

They hadn’t caught up on him yet. Busy with the Tower, the heroes, the resistance… you can’t move further into the city leaving such an enemy at your back. So far the line Snowflake had drawn on the map was holding… bending, stretched thin, but holding. Maybe the fact that these were Chitauri, meaning <familiar>, helped?

“Five minutes,” huffed Tony in his head-set.

“Acknowledged,” the smooth velvet that was his soulmate’s voice eased some of the tension in his back; their plan was working. “But an enemy squadron will be there in two.”

“!?!” words failed him, because… how?!

“Yes… one explanation,” his Soldier was running now, high caliber sniper rifle in hand, changing positions most likely. “Communication array breach…”

“Friday, scramble the shit out of our comms!”

“… on it, Boss,” his baby girl sounded mechanical, spread thin across the fifty suits of the Iron Legion she was controlling, the command over the Tower’s defenses and assuring communication between all of them. “Incoming message from Colonel Rhodes – War Machine is on the way, ETA – 10 minutes! Avengers – another twenty!”

“… twenty?! What are they doing there… are they insane?! It’s Cleveland, not the fucking North Pole!” Tony made a sharp left, throwing the van into a side street; he could already see the building of the VA center… and the alien commandos creeping through the courtyard with their laser lances ready for attack. “Brace for impact, Snowflake… I’m coming in hot!”
When the Chitauri noticed the madman in the minivan and tried shooting him down they hadn’t realized it, but they were already a second too late – the car already made it past two thirds of the distance and was already going top speed, engine roaring somewhat menacingly... like a house cat suddenly discovering it was related to a tiger. Laser blasts whizzed left and right, blasting glass and headrests, failing to impress...

Tony smirked and gunned it more.

***

Sam saw it happen through the tall gym windows. Aliens approaching, careful, clicking to each other in that strange language of theirs... 100 steps... 70 steps... 50 steps...at 30 steps Sam was stilling himself, his hold on the metal pole he poached from one of the barbells tightening...

He heard it before he saw it. A roar of a car engine. Faint, but growing louder by the second. Aliens paused, puzzled and slightly panicked if the frantic clicking was any indication... which left Sam puzzled himself, because... why the agitation? It was as if they hadn’t expected resistance here...

The large Mercedes-Benz minivan painted zebra stripes style that jumped onto the open street from some back alley caught all of them by surprise. And it wasn’t slowing down! Shooting the van down proved ineffective, and, before they knew it, the aliens were rammed through and ran over.

“Wilson!” the door on the driver’s side was kicked open by a sneaker clad foot. “Sam Wilson! You alive?”

“Tony?!” Sam was floored. “What are you doing here?”

“Haven’t you heard, Birdbrain? The Martians are upon us!” Stark jumped out and scurried to the big sliding door, pulling it open to reveal military issue crates. “I brought you all toys too…”

“Oh man… my wings? I thought they were at the Compound!”

“SI made your wings, didn’t you know? Besides I made these better,” he heaved the first crate out. “And what are you standing there for? Help me! We have no time, no time at all!”

“What do you mean? Where are the others?”

“In fucking Cleveland…” Tony heaves another crate out. “Twenty minutes out…”

And Sam is floored once more, this time due to a wholly different reason. They unload the crates of gear in a hurry, and as Tony assembles the wings, Sam runs inside and next time he runs out he isn’t alone. Tony sees the three cheery grandpas and nearly drops the parts he managed to put together.

“Whao… that’s something I haven’t seen before… who are you, people?”

“You know, moral support…”

“Has Coulson seen this?”

“Nope. New York was invaded faster than he came interrogating…”

“Karma in action – would you look at that!” the vets were eyeing them curiously now. “And… Snowflakes think the toads are listening into our comms – that’s how they knew you were, you know, here.”

“…!”
“Yep, my thoughts exactly,” the genius turned to the war veterans, ever the showman on the outside, dead serious on the inside. “I’ve brought some toys for you too! Want to participate? I can drive, but someone has to cover our retreat.”

The soldiers shared a look. Some were smiling.

“You happen to have spare body parts lying around, Mister…?”

“Call me Tony, and, in fact, I do. A right arm, a left arm and I also can organize a couple of legs – absolutely none-invasive.”

“So it was you who made Senya’s arm! Very nice…”

“Thank you… I think.”

The van looks like it lived through a Carmageddon, but somehow still on the run. That German quality gig wasn’t a total lie, it would seem. Sam took to the sky once the wings were ready and loaded. Tony started hooking up the body parts he brought to wiling bodies: the legs went to Miller, the left arm settled on Sasha’s shoulder, the right one was handed to Wolly, the only marine in their mist. A few minutes of calibration and… presto! Invalids => soldiers.

“You, Tony, are something else…” Eric climbed behind the wheel. In the rear view mirror he could see his friends taking their seats; the more able ones were preparing weapons Tony brought for battle. No haste, all business. Like old times. Sasha’s grand-dad got his sniper rifle too… and handled it like a pro, hands steady, eyes sharp and steely. An old soldier…

“Красивая… прям взгляд не оторвать! (Such a beauty… can’t keep my eyes off her!)”

“Кончай пускать слюни на пушку, Чижик! (Don’t drool on the gun, Chijik!) Ты ее не покупал! (You didn’t buy it!)”

“Да ладно тебе, сержант Моня… покупал, не покупал… прицелился, хуже репья! (Chill, Sargent Monya… have I bought it, haven’t I bought it… you’re worse than a bur!)”

The one called Monya scowled. Chijik cuddled his rifle protectively. The third one, name still unknown, sighed…

“Волчары на вас нет… (You’re lucky Wolf isn’t here to straighten you up…)”

Tony who was now riding shotgun stilled. He still had his translator with him.

“Are you all snipers too?”

That made the old men pause and eye him apprehensively. Then something, apparently, clicked, because now they were staring at him wide eyed, and Tony had a hunch it had little to do with his scandalous reputation.

“Едрить мою кочерыжку… это ж он! (I’ll be damned… it’s him!)” the man who everyone called Chijik was eloquent as ever. “Этот… как егор… (This… how’d you call it…)”

“Соулмэйт (Soulmate),” Sargent Monya managed to look both surprised and exasperated at the same time.

“Во-во! (That’s it-that’s it!)”

“I am very… sorry for my… associates, Mister Stark,” the mystery veteran’s accent was thick, worse
than Seva’s by a margin. “Major Chijevsky was born in a barn…”

“Oh, it’s cool… so, you must be…”

“Yes. Seva called us, told about what happened… before… and after. Volk (the Wolf) did not want
us involved… probably. We will have to teach him that friendship does not work that way…”

“So… you planned an ambush,” Tony was smiling though. “Might work! On the wrong side of
ninety is not a very safe age to travel… he won’t see you coming.”

The man’s eyes warmed at that, and then he reached out for a handshake.

“Boris Chernov, nice to meet you…”

“No military rank?”

“No… it is useless now…”

Chijik for some reason didn’t think so, because he gave his friend a disapproving glare, before
exploding in a fit of theatrical coughing among which the engineer heard three familiar sounds: K, G… and B.

“Well, I wouldn’t be so… dramatic?”

A laugh.

“A Russian thing, I am sure.”

***

It was a strange conversation, Tony found himself thinking. Those boys Yakov told him about were
all grown up now… and forgot nothing. So when Yakov went missing… and two days turned into
two weeks, then two months, then two years…

They never stopped looking.

The war ended, families were built and broken, children were born, brought up… and buried, but
they kept on… Modest Yavorski, an internationally known Russian composer and pianist with a
permission to go abroad for concerts, General-Major Sidor Chijikov, the man who many thought to
be the Father of Russian Special Forces, and Boris Chernov, a former KGB field agent turned
Colonel of the most feared Spy Agency in the world…

“You tried covering as much ground as possible… from different angles too…”

Mister Chernov gave a slight nod, before offering the engineer a sharp smile.

“There is a common joke in Russia that the KGB knew everything about everybody… it is not true.
But our knowledge was certainly very extensive… and I was very surprised to find out that there was
another KGB hidden inside the KGB. And two days later Modya had to help me smuggle a doped
up would be assassin wrapped in a carpet to Chijik’s summer house… If I am to be killed, I usually
prefer to know who sanctioned it.”

“Scary interrogation stories next?”

“You would be surprised how little people need to be cracked open…”
“Oh, I know…”

“I’m afraid of water too big of a price to pay for freedom, Mr. Stark?”

Tony just shrugged. What could he say? They weren’t competing for the name of the Most Traumatized Victim here…

“Boss, they broke through! They broke through! Veronica is offline!” Friday’s desperate voice in his ear piece made the man jump. “I repeat – Veronica is offline!”

Veronica. The Hulkbuster armor. And they were closest – he could hear the frantic shooting mingled with bloodthirsty screeching and laser blasts already… equally loud for now, but that will soon change… 0.1 second to make a decision.

Why was he even thinking about this?

“Fri, send me the nearest!”

The door was kicked open once more, and he threw himself out… only to be enveloped in a comfortable embrace of red and gold, metal gleaming bright.

“The Tower or the sub-way – should be good enough!” the last that came out before the face plate slid down covering his rapidly dulling hazel eyes. The next moment repulsors roared, gathering power, and he was off, leaving a slightly shocked audience behind…

“There’s a subway station near the Tower…” Wolly was not very subtle, meaning that’s where the heat was.

Eric grinned…

Chapter End Notes

Eric’s *legs* are something Tony came up while working on Sunny’s arm) a prototype based on Ironman armor boots, but lighter, no repulsors, made for walking, not flying... something between mediaval knight and gothic style boots if you can imagine it.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The Aftermath...
New York is rebuilt, the Soldier and the Captain share their suspicions...
... and Tony is one step away from the Bleeding Edge.

Chapter Notes

Extremis Tony!

Feel like I should issue a warning about hints of thoughts about possible suicide...
Tony saw what Extremis can do and he doesn't want to become a danger to anyone, so he asks what he asks...
and Yakov doesn't really see the point of living in a world with no Tony in it (if you notice anything out of place, let me know) feedback is important)

When the Avengers arrived, the dynamic on the battlefield had already changed.

The Chitauri switched tactics, concentrating the entire force of their army in one single spot – the Veronica Fall. A patch of Manhattan ground two street blocks in size. Barricades of cars, stone and rubble surrounded a subway station in a loose circle and inside these improvised trenches were soldiers, military and National Guard, equally covered in dirt, blood and sweat, so it was impossible to say who belonged where. The volunteers who ended up here - a kid, barely out of high school, who could manipulate technology and who kept fixing the Hulkbuster again and again and again until there was nothing left to fix and a middle aged woman who could heal with her songs – were in no better shape than the rest of them, their orange vests dirtied beyond all recognition, but like the rest of them they held it together, because there were people hiding in the subway… and they were already past any rational civility apart from the prehistoric ‘us vs them’. Ironman arrived with a blast, quite literally shooting the five flying chariots that were giving them grief out of the sky. That made the Chitauri ground forces stagger and pull back, horrified clicks and screeches all over the place - they remembered the last time they came across this red and gold specter, maybe a little too well. He did nuke them…

Tony gave them a moment to gather their bearings (and set out word that Ironman entered the fray, in person, not just via suit) and struck, his fury coiled tight and ice cold…

Somewhere in the city, in the realm of roofs and ledges, the Soldier pauses, before ripping off his mask and howling as loud as his enhanced vocal cords could possibly go. The aliens are on to him almost instantly, so the Soldier runs…

“Catch me, sunshine! I am bringing the party to you…”
“Will do, beautiful…” judging by his tone, Tony was already fighting. “Next time, though, I’m choosing where our date is going to be…”

“Take me out dancing.”

“Sir, yes, sir… now get your hot ass over here, I’m starting to feel lonely…”

“…bossy man. Why do I love you?”

“I have no idea…”

They orchestrate an ambush in an improvised bottleneck – a narrow enough street between two skyscrapers. Tony takes out four, the Soldier the other three, and after all that was only a chorus of bang-bang-blast. They fall in sync easily, finding a rhythm that worked for both, not unlike the time when they danced Brazilian tango in kitchen… a cherished memory.

“Strange, you need to close those portals…”

“Working on it, Stark,” Doctor Strange was his usual snarky self. “Rome wasn’t built in a day, and these portals wouldn’t be closed either… no matter how hard you push me.”

“Hard, eh? You think I’m hard?”

“Oh please… are you five or something?”

“Blah-blah-blah… and you don’t excite me… not one bit…”

“Focus, dusha moya (soul of mine)…”

“I’m focused… like a heat seeking missile, baby…”

“…easily deflected.”

“Maybe to you…”

“Cut the flirting, you lovebirds!” that would be Sam.

“Shut it and go save somebody, Birdbrain!”

“Ha, I’m not afraid of you!”

“… Wilson,” yeah, Snowflake got his back.

“… and I am shutting up now. Look out for grenades!”

The chorus changed to blast-blast-bang, because much like Yakov kept count of the charging time of the armor’s repulsors Tony kept track of the moments when his light needed an extra second to reload. The military provided cover fire and clipped away the few survivors who managed to crawl away from this two man deathtrap.

When the missive that Steve and company joined the battle reached them, the street in front of Veronica Fall was littered with bodies. Ironman and the Winter Soldier moved the fight further up the street, their bang-bang-blast playing on repeat, as unrelenting as ever. When Yakov ran out of ammo (inevitable), the assault rifle was discarded without a second thought in favor of a pair of knives. One might think this would make the Soldier less effective, but surprisingly the level of carnage he left behind only doubled…
“That’s your weapon of choice, huh, sugarplum? Not the rifle…”

“I have been always proficient with a blade… trustworthy… like coming home.”

“Ever wonder why?”

“I was told once that I have an old soul…”

“Just how old is too old with you, Snowflake?” Tony was grinning behind the metal faceplate.

“Well, you are a futurist, yes?” Yakov smiled back. “Years do not matter! And one hundred and six is still a very good number, I think…”

“Ha! Grandpa…”

They were interrupted by a humongous pillar of orange light that broke the sky in two. Alien crafts in the way were obliterated, and when the pillar hit the three alien portals at once (yep, it was that big…), the city, if only for a second, was engulfed in a wave of blinding light. When all of them could see again, the first thing many New York citizens did was look at the sky. The portals were gone.

“Strange, that you showing off?”

“Why thank you, Stark. I think we did okay…”

“What was that, by the way?”


“Fine… keep your secrets, you big meanie…”

They were joking of course. Like teammates… and they were! Teammates, that is, because when Ironman was appointed to the ‘helpers’-roster, things here began to change. Slowly, gradually, but they began to train together, discuss tactics and strategy… Tony even organized a volunteer program for those with super-powers for situations similar to this one.

Tony brought change everywhere and anywhere he went.

“We must organize a sweeping operation, solnyshko.”

“I’d love to, but once Cap is on the scene, it’s his show to run…”

“Hm…”

“Hate losing control? I do too…” the engineer sighed. “Let’s occupy ourselves with something we can do, sugarplum, like help the people. Many were evacuated, but just as many were still inside those buildings that are now in ruins - the rescue teams could really benefit from our abilities all things considered.”

“Understood. But I should warn you – I have never saved anyone before.”

“Really? Well, you saved me, so your track record isn’t so bad…”

“Hah! So kind…”

Tony huffed out something fond in return. No one has called him kind before… ‘You are a good
man, Tony’ was as far as it usually went. Yakov noticed his silent trepidation (because of course he did), stepped close and kissed the suit on the metal cheek.

“Wow…”

“A little something, just for you…”

Tony laughed, glad that the faceplate was hiding his furious blush. Hot-rod red – inside and out!

“Um… o-kay, feeling like a little school girl here… crushing hard enough to crash! Phew! Come on, let’s go dig out some people now… Fri, would you be so kind and point us in the necessary direction?”

“Yes, Boss,” the AI’s voice sounded tired, but pleased. “About three blocks to the left from the place where you stand is a collapsed building. There are people trapped inside… a rescue team is trying to get to them, but with little success.”

“Alert them, please.”

“Will do!”

“Ready, Red October?”

“Так точно… (Yes, sir…)”

***

Steve found them doing it - saving people Tony Stark style, with holograms, high-tech scanning equipment and quick-witted genius solutions. Where technology and heavy machinery struck a dead-end, the Soldier stepped in and with a few spot-on questions gave them a new perspective to work with which made Tony’s eyes immediately light up with new ideas, and his enthusiasm was always alarmingly contagious…

Now was not much different. Not a collapsed multi-storied apartment building, but a museum on the verge of folding in like a card house, and burying millennia worth of art under the rubble. He saw construction workers, rescue team members, some volunteers in orange vests (Sam explained who they were, and Steve had to stifle the feeling of bewilderment, because… so many?!?) and even one historian – all huddled over a hologram, bouncing ideas off each other. They were actually holding a consultation! Save the building to save the art or leave the building and carry out the art? How to save the building without damaging the art? How to carry the art out without ending up covered in brick and glass up till the ears?

Everyone was in the zone, Tony included.

Yakov noticed him lingering on the sidelines and with a barely there nod allowed him to approach. Steve did just that. He still didn’t know where he stood with this man exactly… thinking ‘grey’ took time getting used to.

“We arrived as soon as we could. Jumped in the quinjet as soon as the first aliens were identified as Chitauri, but…”

“You were delayed.”

“That’s one way to put it,” the Captain clasped the bridge of his nose in silent irritation. “Fury insisted we change into the new gear straight away…”
“Untested?” the Soldier was mildly surprised. Even Hydra did not send their Asset into battle with untested equipment.

“We had to take something to soothe his worries at least partially, so… we took the comms.”

“Ah…” both wise and unwise, because for something so small in size it was one of the most complicated parts of any uniform; needed time to master. “Did the devices have crystal parts in them that glowed purple?”

The question caught Steve by surprise.

“… yes?”

“The bomb in Moscow also had glowing purple parts made of crystal.”

“What are you saying…”

“Today… have you spoken with Sam prior your arrival? Using your new communication units…”

“Yes. I… asked him where he was… oh… oh my God…”

“My sunshine managed to intervene in time. Yet the problem stands…”

“You can’t prove this…”

“No, I cannot.”

“Does Tony know?”

“Yes. And he was invited to participate in the investigation concerning the Moscow incident.”

“That’s good. After New York it was Stark Industries that utilized the remnants of alien technology. Tony saw to that personally.”

“Hm. Stone?”

“He wasn’t there. Just crates with equipment and a user’s guide… I need to warn the others.”

“You are horrible at subterfuge, Captain.”

“Well, I’m no Bucky, but when needed, I can pull off a relatively convincing ‘dumb blond’ so you know…”

Yakov huffed out a silent laugh. ‘Dumb blond’, indeed… assumptions get you killed in his experience. Steve, though, was only learning…

“James was not good at subterfuge too. His Brooklyn charm tasted of plastic most days… so we usually just went with the ‘bold and shameless’ type.”

“You are, um, bold and shameless actually…”

“Have nothing to feel shame about. The aliens?”

“We performed a thorough clean-up operation. SHIELD is taking care of the remains… I have never seen Director Fury so happy in my life. It is a little alarming, honestly.”

“I will relate your words.”
“Is Bucky… safe?”

“No one is safe in this dangerous world, but James can take care of himself.”

Steve nodded, turning serious.

“Ain’t that the truth… you won’t tell me where?”

“No. Natalia knows you are bad at subterfuge too.”

“Yakov?”

“Yes?”

“Why is she after Sunny? It’s not about Hydra at all…”

“There is a reason you don’t put two spiders in a jar, Captain. They kill each other.”

“So this is personal. Have they met… before?”

“No,” Yakov went silent for several moments, contemplating. “Age difference, you must understand. The Widows were given a muddled version of the serum made from James’ blood… not to change them, just to make them a little extra. It is their shared background that is to blame…”

“Shared background?”

“They were both… street children, yes? Father unknown, mother died early in their lives, hard life in an orphanage. When they were chosen, both thought it to be their lucky ticket in life. They were both the best, so due to their training they can’t help but want to find out who is the best, and now when Arseniy is wounded and in a vulnerable position Natalia thinks she has the advantage…”

“I can’t help thinking that in the war things were much more simple…”

The Soldier just shrugged. Some indeed were.

***

They rebuilt the city… together. Not just Tony and his relief fund, but… together. The UN was suspiciously silent, most likely mulling over what this attack on New York really meant in the great scheme of things…

To Tony, Yakov and the few trustworthy individuals that made their team, though, it was crystal clear, no world council needed.

They still weren’t ready.

They still weren’t united enough to face whatever Thanos was going to throw at them, much less the Titan himself.

… so Tony returned to the Bleeding Edge project. When everything failed him, the engineer returned to the only thing that didn’t: his soulmate and his tech. They tackled it every evening, Yakov at his side, bare shoulder to bare knee, sharing his gifts once again. It even influenced their lab dress code: Tony started wearing shorts instead of old worn jeans, while Yakov switched to tank-tops from the long-sleeved T-shirts he preferred when feeling casual.

The things they created were no longer just ideas in the confines of one genius mind anymore. The
new alloy that rivaled vibranium, the new nanobot algorithm, new uses for arc reactor power, the fourth generation unit… and the lonely syringe with the fixed Extremis serum that was sealed away in a high security vault. A farewell to humanity right there, within arm’s reach…

“You know, I was planning to stab myself with that after I finished the suit,” Tony eyed the vault with a strange expression. “But I don’t know what we will find in that bunker, and I’m just a man in a can…”

“It is okay to feel fear, dusha moya (soul of mine)… it keeps you alive.”

“Well, I’ve seen what the stuff can do. I fixed it, sure…”

“Miss Friday showed me the footage of your fights with AIM. It was… interesting. But your serum is not like that, yes?”

“The incomplete formula I wrote while drunk resulted in those unstable fire-breathing monsters you saw, Snowflake. It wasn’t supposed to look like that at all! The way I envisioned it, physical regeneration was meant to be mostly a side effect.”

“Oh?” Yakov was intrigued.

“It was meant to propel a human being into a whole new plain of existence, and because I am a futurist, you can guess what ‘plain of existence’ I am talking about…”

“Computers?”

“Bingo! It was never to become tangible reality, though,” Tony fell silent for a few heartbeats time, before asking: “Yasha, did it hurt when… shit what am I even asking, of course, it hurt… probably, hellish…”

Yakov just smiled in return, a tad sadly, but he understood where his sunshine was coming from, why he was asking. He wanted to know. It was important for him to know. This knowledge would give him an idea of what to expect. Even if the reality would be different, this information will make him feel safer.

And he will keep his soulmate safe.

“As you may have guessed, there are several versions of the super-soldier serum and each has its own activation mechanism. All of them have one common trait: a liquid component injected directly into the blood stream and a radiation trigger. Rogers became Captain America this way, James became the Winter Soldier this way… and I also read some interesting things about Doctor Banner.”

“The American military tried replicating Erskine’s serum, but instead of Vita-rays they used Gamma radiation. There was an accident in the lab. Banner survived, but was left with a green rage monster inside he couldn’t control… well, I call him ‘a green rage monster’ now mostly as a joke, because he’s no monster, really... calls himself the Hulk.”

“… an alter ego?”

“Yes and no, something in between, because Hulk is everything Bruce is not. Banner is the quiet type, scholarly and modest, smart as hell with 8 PhD’s in biology, genetics and radiation studies… tried to find a cure for his condition, but failed. In 2012 if not for the Hulk I honestly don’t know how that battle would have ended… he is a force of nature!”

“And your friend.”
“They both are. Others called me crazy for not treating him and the Other Guy like a walking time bomb…” then something occurred to Tony. “What about you?”

“They injected me with anything that struck their interest, no system, so it was not the radiation that triggered the change, but an odd combination of chemicals. When Zola tried to replicate the result, many died…”

“But… not all?”

“Two more survived. And were hidden away… until further notice. From what I overheard, it had something to do with our blood chemistry.”

“Sounds like a dormant catalyst… you know, like a sleeping gene? For example, the Carbonell family my mother comes from are very Italian and suddenly… wham! My mom is born a blue-eyed blond. My grandfather even suspected that my grandma cheated on him somehow. Big scandal! Until they found out that his great-great-great-great-great-grandmother immigrated to Italy from Norway… and was a blue-eyed blond.”

“Ah. We never kept track of our family tree in such a manner. Father did not, at least. The Torvalds, on the other hand, oversaw their family records with German efficiency.”

“He seems like a person who would hold onto family tradition. Why didn’t he?”

“He… never really knew his parents very well. They were respected, an aristocratic family, quite wealthy… and they also wanted to enjoy the pleasures of high society life in Petersburg, so they shipped him off to their own parents who lived in the suburbs as soon as it was polite and possible, only to later enroll him in a specialized military boarding school when he became of age. Family tradition? There was none. He and mother had to build their own.”

“Oh.”

“Returning to your question…” here Yakov turned serious. “I’ve always had a high tolerance for pain - that is what made torturing me very fun - but when it happened… if we apply that one to ten scale you introduced me to, I wager a solid nine and a half.”

“… nine and a half?!” memories of the arm installation were still fresh, so Tony had firsthand experience in how much his Soldier could take. That time they were not even close to the critical line, a measly six or seven – Tony and his AI helpers had been very careful and very gentle in their ministrations.

“You must understand, my sunshine, the more physical damage you happen to have when the shift starts the greater the pain when the serum begins changing you. It tried bringing my arm back… and those hours I could only describe as excruciating.”

“…and I am with a hole in my sternum, half healed rib fractures, reduced lung capacity, heart condition, a liver nearly totaled by alcohol and drug consumption…” Tony cringed already estimating the fifty shades of pain he would have to go through. “You’ll have to promise me something, though, Yashen’ka…”

“Anything.”

“If something goes wrong, if I made a mistake or can’t get Extremis under control… you’ll off me.”

“Antosha…”
“Promise me! That stuff there… it is toxic. It can’t get into wrong hands… or the right hands… or any hands, for the matter. The government wanted their hands on my armor, wanted it weaponized and we compromised with War Machine, but this… this would be so much worse, especially with the aliens coming.”

“… you have my word.”

They never broached the issue again. A settled matter, really: both of them knew that should anything indeed go wrong and should Tony Stark indeed leave the plain of the living… his Soldier would follow.

Together: in this world and the next.

Won’t be the first time…

***

Tony Stark thought himself a seasoned man, thought he knew a thing or two about pain.

Extremis proved him wrong: he burned on the inside, burned on the outside… he burned. Liquid fire ran through his veins instead of blood and if he were made of iron he would be red-hot turning on white right now.

“Scream, lyubov’ moya (love of mine),” Yakov was whispering all the way across the lab, but to Tony it was like the bells of hell thundering right into his ears. “It would be easier to handle if you scream.”

“It’s… not that… bad, Snowflake, but now… I know how… ah, shit… those medieval witches felt… Did they… burn witches… in Russia?”

“No, sunshine, they did not.”

“Tell me…” the bond between them, also red-hot with artificial heat, thrummed with familiar curiosity. “Your voice… is beautiful and when I concentrate on you… it doesn’t hurt so much.”

The Soldier chuckled. Only Tony would call his voice that - the reality of it was grave, emotionless and frighteningly unhinged.

“As you wish…”

He started with general things: that not all witches were bad and that not all beautiful women were witches. Then they ventured into theology for a bit, and Tony learned that in Russia people were more inclined to worship the Godmother than they do Jesus Christ, as well as a multitude of saints.

"The Slavs were pagan, before they became Christian. Some part of the old way manifested itself through this…"

"Bend… Not break… Smart move…"

"Orthodox Christianity is a peaceful religion. But you cannot root out a lifetime of warrior culture by several centuries of promoting love and compassion."

"Could use… some love and compassion… ouch… I think it reached my left knee joint… fell of a skateboard, busted it pretty bad…"

"You had a skateboard?"
"Rhodey had one… tried to teach me… turned out physics on paper and… physics in real life… are vastly different… you have to account for bumps in the road too…"

“How are you feeling, Antosha?”

“Smokin’ hot, Buttercup, but… still here… did they have… skateboards in your time?”

“Somewhere, maybe, but not in that middle of nowhere nook I grew up in. We had motorcycles, though… I was rather notorious at age fifteen.”

“Neat… I just… thought about something more… rustic…”

“Horses, you mean. The wild-wild West. Only matryoshka style. Father tried to teach me to ride, though…”

Tony choked out a laugh. It took a lot out of him, but he didn’t care.

“He was… in the cavalry… right?”

“You remember,” Yakov smiled. “I’m glad.”

“He’s my… father-in-law figure… I hope you don’t mind. Of course, I… remember! So… did you ace… it?”

“No, little one. It was hate at first sight…”

Chapter End Notes

The 'bang-bang-blast' was inspired by this art:
https://i.pinimg.com/564x/4e/dd/54/4edd54e2d2880804380fa4a1ca775911.jpg
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The world is calm, but its a calm before the storm...
Tony and Yakov attempt to use it to the fullest. Sometime ago they discussed time travel, but they never thought to witness the results of it firsthand.

Chapter Notes

You should probably blame the Endgame movie for this, because I just couldn't leave Morgan fatherless(

Volk - Russian for wolf)
Russian has a lot of suffixes that show affection... and also make words sound funny by default X) but that's part of the charm, really)) so Yashul'ka basically can be translated as 'little Yasha', spoken with fondness)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Extremis changed… well, not everything. Simply, a lot.

Tony stood stark, pardon, naked in front of his big bathroom mirror and was slowly, but surely freaking out about how young he looked. As if Afghanistan never happened and Tony Stark, billionaire-playboy-philanthropist, was back in his prime!

Correction, because it did happen, the arc reactor now a permanent fixture in the middle of his chest, blueish light filling up his scars turning them into extravagant tattoos… even his eye-color changed: still honey-brown, but with a lot more golden ‘honey’ in the practically non-existent ‘brown’… that charming asshole, though? Never to return, not on his watch.

Apart from the obvious side-effects like dropping almost two decades in two days, the genius found that he rather liked what he saw: toned muscle, healthy skin… a six-pack? damn… and he knew for a fact that his Snowflake did too. Their bond as deep as it was already, suffered through a series of changes right along with him, deepening their connection even more…

He looked in that mirror, looked past the mirror and saw… himself. A century ago, in the 1800s, he lived in Italy, for the first time alone. Bright honey-brown dull and unresponsive, and his many relatives, worried, kept watch, but he managed to slip away to the seacoast… to never come back. Two centuries ago, in the 1700s, it was Paris, and he was a student… caught sight of familiar icy-blues in the crowd on the way home and froze, afraid to guess wrong… the answering warm smile on the Russian officer’s face eases his fears… no mistake. Three centuries ago, in the 1600s, they met in Venice and left Europe for the first time, sailing East… pirates and they go down fighting, together. Four centuries, five, six… Jesus, how far back do they go exactly?

The bond flickers and Tony gets his answer… suddenly. Like a flash grenade to the face: one second he stands in his bathroom, staring, the other he is a boy, no more than fifteen, trying to hide behind a
pile of chopped wood... and he fails miserably. The tunic he’s wearing is just too bright of a color to not be noticed. The estate around him is burning, screams and shouting echo inside marble walls: somebody screams in fear, others loudly voice their triumph... the boy that is him is terrified of what was happening as much as he possibly could be. That’s why he doesn’t notice the man approaching from behind. A hand, dressed in metal and leather, lands on the back of the boy’s neck making him jump and turn... and honey-browns meet icy-blues for the first time...

Antonius is the youngest son of a wealthy roman patrician, whose entire family was slaughtered and property raided sometime during the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

Volk is a Slav warrior, who sailed here to slaughter and raid, twenty men under his command, their fate sealed the very moment the boy mumbles a shaky question, the same question that has been inked into the skin of his left shoulder by the gods almost fifteen winters ago...

They leave the burning household behind that night together and never look back. And it is only the very first time of many to come...

“Did you know we met in the middle of the V-th century?” was the first thing Tony said upon returning to their living room clad only in his Soldier boxers, where his light was meditating over his faithful Stark Automatic. “You had white hair…”

Yakov quirked a surprised eyebrow at that, then something must have occurred to him and he nodded:

“I believe I did. Watched my family die from the woodshed where mother managed to push us in... me and my baby sister. Bandits attacked our homestead: killed father, raped and killed mother, took whatever valuables they could find, killed the livestock they couldn’t take with them... I buried them all: my parents, the three bandits father managed to kill, our dog, our horse, our cow with her newborn calf, the goats... white hair after this.”

For a second there Tony thought his legs are going to betray him and give out. All of this had been lived through more than a millennia ago, but to hear it...

His Soldier knew what orphan life feels like. Firsthand experience, even if it was muddled by time. That’s why, when he killed Tony’s parents, he knew that Tony would survive... because he did, many times before.

No wonder soulmates were considered special - it takes a strong will to live through the same shit life after life after life...

Or they are just the select ‘lucky ones’ who can actually remember it all...

“How old were you?”

“Seven winters I think... sister was about to see her first one. Our uncle took us in later. He lived not far and came to investigate the smoke... two days later. He was kind to us, his wife – not so much.”

“What?”

“She was a vain woman, from a respected and wealthy family, and she ruled the entire household with an iron fist... treated those who worked for them like trash. In her eyes we weren’t even that”, Yakov paused, thoughtful. “Strange to remember this...”

“Yeah,” Tony nestled into the couch by his side and smiled happily when his light pulled him near in a one-armed hug; the second arm continued assembling the Stark Automatic. “Like your memories
“Later? I grew up,” Yakov smirked, dark and chilly. “Father named me Vozgar’ (I was a curious child, took to new knowledge like a flame takes to dry wood hence the name…), but soon everyone started calling me…”

“…Volk?”

“Yes. That original flame, though, was one step away from dying out. And would have, yet the gods decided differently… and linked *me* to *you*. You gave the next fifteen years of my life purpose, Antosha.”

“Oh,” when they met, Yakov must have been thirty, which meant… a lot of things, including the fact that he was a damn good warrior to have survived that long. “And your sister?”

“She met a decent young man during one of my… voyages, fell in love, he loved her back… did not back off even after I gave him the ‘shovel talk’…”

“Ha! Bet you used the chopping wood technique…”

“Naturally.”

They shared a good-natural laugh, and now it was Yakov who was asking:

“There was a bracelet covering your mark when I found you… we broke it apart later, but… I always wondered of its purpose, even if you joked about it being a Roman tradition.”

Yeah, that sounded like him alright… half-truth here, semi-truth there…

“Father wasn’t always a politician - he led legions into battle once upon a time, in the East too. He knew enough of the local dialect and writing to recognize the word… didn’t take the fact that the gods bonded his son with a barbarian very well. Would have called it the story of my life, but it literally is…”

“He ordered it covered?”

“Yeah. You called it a bracelet – in truth, it was a manacle. Custom made, and he had the key hidden. I never knew where,” Tony cringed, unconscientiously moving closer: to the warmth, to the security, to the now. “Never stopped me from looking, though, because… I could feel you since I turned three and you weren’t evil at all.”

“What happened to your mother?”

“She died giving birth to my sister. The girl… didn’t make it too.”

“… apologies.”

“No! It may sound cruel, but I’m happy she died when she did. Didn’t have to witness the monster father turned into…”

“You were not hiding from us that day - you were hiding from *him*.”

“He ordered my arm chopped off in a drunken haze, so… I ran! And ran straight into you… Yasha?”

“Yes?”
“You’ve always managed to find me… every century, right as rain. Except that one time… what happened?”

“Napoleon waged war on the Russian Empire in 1812, after conquering nearly all of Europe. I was an officer in the Russian imperial army and died in the battle of Borodino. You, my sunshine, must have been born later…”

“Huh…”

“I left you alone, Antosha. For that I am sorry.”

“You fought as hard as you could, Snowflake, I know you enough to be certain of this. But when push comes to shove in battles of such grand scale? Quoting the classics, shit happens.”

***

It was Pepper who gave them the necessary excuse to travel. SI was an international company with branches all over the world, plus they won that rehabilitation center project…

Tony had to visit the sights.

As far as things went, only Yakov, Pepper, Rhodey (and, boy, was he pissed at them both…), Friday and the ominous Mister D knew about what lurked in his blood. Because the serum worked just like he pictured it. When Tony, for the lack of better term, went online, he also acquired a certain presence… yeah, in the Force. Jedi jokes aside, Extremis turned his brain into the world’s most powerful super-computer, gave his mind AI properties, which was fascinating, but… his firewalls are going to need work…

Purplish-blue for his baby-girl, reddish-orange for D… what did they see him as? The genius only hoped it was something along the lines of red and gold.

“You know, Snowflake, I can hear the nanobots in your arm.”

They were in Tony’s private jet, heading for Japan. His signature business armor (read: Tom Ford suit and yellow tinted shades to make the ember glow of his eyes less obvious) was ready 100%, but it was Yasha’s first outing of the sort (yeah, it went kind of backwards somewhere, because they skipped the cute coffee dates altogether and jumped straight into the Big Boy League) and he was helping his light familiarize himself with his black-on-black. Tom Ford wasn’t cutting it for such a man like Yakov, so they had to take a page out of John Wick’s book and have a suit custom made.

Now they only had to figure out where which weapon would be hidden best.

“What are they doing?” the Soldier was genuinely curious.

Tony concentrated on the slight, clearly busy tune coming from the arm, and furrowed his brows, clearly puzzled.

“They’re building.”

“Ah, must be the lock-picks…”

“…lock-picks?”

“For mechanical locks, yes. It would be good to have a set on you at all times, and my little helpers seem to like bending metal in odd shapes.”
“… I never really asked you how much control you have over that thing, did I?”

“No,” the answering smirk would have made the Cheshire cat proud. “You like surprises.”

“Only pleasant ones, sugarplum, and when I’m doing the surprising, ya dig?”

“No special birthday cake for you then. Only certified, verified and boring ingredients.”

Tony huffed out a laugh and punched the man in the shoulder… lightly. Felt like hitting a brick wall, but he never really tested how strong he was now, with Extremis in his veins, so… careful.

“I’m okay with boring, Yashul’ka.”

The Soldier all but purred like he always did when Tony spoke Russian:

“Good…”

***

Japan was uneventful… if you are an executive of a multibillion international company and arrived there to speak purely business. There were talks about constructing an arc reactor powered energy plant (and Tony was all in on this one), because after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster the government using the country’s international corporations was looking for safer alternatives. The Japanese were shocked when Tony said that negotiations for new land (which Japan didn’t have an abundance of) won’t be needed, because SI could successfully conduct construction work right on the territory of the closed Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

“B-but… what ab-bout… the radiation?!” only the high level government representative training kept the man from stammering… too much.

“The issue can be solved… if you believe in a bit of magic and love plants. Doctor Banner in collaboration with Asgardian healers and sorcerers is working on the first Earth-Asgardian plant hybrid - it’s a very Japanese looking tree, you’ll love it, I think – and one of its properties is sucking excessive radiation out of the eco-system. They went to Chernobyl for field tests, planted some saplings… the trees are still there.”

The stammering stopped, abandoned for avid interest. They’re going to look this up, Tony could tell. The ride back to the hotel was equally uneventful, but once they reached their suite…

Ping… Hell’s Bells! And Tony’s hand stopped one millimeter away from touching the door handle. What made him stop? What spooked him? Sure as hell wasn’t base human intuition...

Yakov silently unsheathed the blades he carried on his forearms. The genius could practically feel his mindset changing from man to weapon, nanobots humming like busy bees, calibrating the arm for his Soldier’s preferred brand of bloodshed…

He would ensure the first strike, but Tony’s gauntlet, not designed for silent warfare to begin with, would certainly deliver the second.

Ready?

Yes.

He opened the door. Yasha slid in… and stopped two steps past the threshold.

There was a little girl standing in the middle of their open-plan hotel room, familiar pink hue fading
away from her hair, hands… and bare feet. Dirty bare feet. With blisters.

Not the child's unexpected presence was what floored him, though…

What floored him was the way she screamed 'Daddy!' radiating so much pure joy it could be bottled. You can’t fake that, can you?

***

His sunshine was good with children. Due to the nature of their bond they could not have any of their own, but he was always surrounded by them: siblings, nephews and nieces, grandchildren…

This girl, Morgan, was different, because, for once, she was his. Obvious fact. Like the sun rising in the East. There was an Ironman helmet hidden inside a Dora the Explorer backpack that went unnoticed in the first moments of the chaotic meeting… and what Tony called a data core, hanging on a shoelace around the littlest one's neck. Who carries data cores on shoelaces? Only those, who do not have anything else to wear them on…

The story Morgan told them sounded fantastic as in ‘fantastically unbelievable’, but… they were super-heroes and had a taste for strange. Time travel? Psh! Their bond was time travel, only… longer, stretched out. But all this gibberish quickly became unimportant, especially when they heard the rest…

The world tiny M came from had already lived through the so called Infinity wars. And the Titan won. But the Avengers assembled, turned the world back to normal and… Tony Stark died. Like a hero, sacrificing himself, but… died.

"Oh, sweet pie, I'm so sorry…" his sunshine’s hugs were still a little awkward, but he was slowly opening up to be touched by other people.

"It's okay, daddy… I know you are not my real daddy, but since what happened to mommy and Happy… it's hard to sleep with the lights off…"

"…they are not dead too, are they?" that would have been too cruel, Tony knows.

"Mommy is in the hospital… the doctors say if she doesn't wake up soon they are going to shut her off life support."

Coma.

"And Happy? What happened to him?"

"A complicated operation. I come to visit every day, but he doesn't seem to get better."

Wheelchair. Or bedridden.

If the other Tony Stark's life resembled his sunshine's at least partially, the circle of people he could leave his child with was… not very big. Probably, about as big as it was here: Rhodes, Potts, Hogan… him.

"Who were you staying with, M?" Tony must have thought along the same lines.

"Grandpa Steve, but it was night when I sneaked out, so he probably didn't notice… daddy?"

"Yeah?"
"You are not married to my mommy this time around, are you?"

Observant. Yakov approved.

"If your mom is who I think it is..." the genius smiles sheepishly. "We did try... hard. Granite hard! And ended up as friends anyway. So, meet Yakov, my better half! Yeah..."

Morgan then turned her gaze to Yakov and stared with that peculiar wide-eyed stare that only cats seem to have. The Soldier stared right back just as unblinking. She did resemble Tony when he was seven, other dimension or not.

"Uncle Yasha is fine."

The girl beamed. One of her canines looked like the tip was broken off.

"Cool!"

Tony’s child. Like DUM-E, U, Butterfingers… like Friday… like Jarvis, whom he never met. He only just met her… and here, he was willing to kill for her.

***

It took a lot to wear the little menace down. She forged on and on and on, running on pure spite due to the lack of coffee fumes… fending off sleep (and, it would seem, nightmares) as long as possible. Tony knew the signs - he went through the same thing after New York!

But Morgan was seven. How could he die on her like that?

They coaxed her into a quick bath and a late night dinner. Then Tony brought in the big guns and the three of them watched Moana together. M was out like a light sooner than the movie reached its end, hugging the Ironman helmet like one would a teddy-bear...

She missed her dad.

Yakov left the film running, tuning down the volume enough so they could speak. Tony was examining the data core, lost in deep thought. When he spoke, though...

"I am a selfish man, Snowflake. Two big of a character trait to not be shared… and he had it all! Friends, family… a home, for Pete’s sake. Sacrifice play? There was only one reason - hear me? one! - for him to do that..."

"Which is?"

"There was no other way. They were losing again and there was no other way."

"... or it had to be you."

"Me?"

"Yes. Only you had something that was essential for the plan. The Stones of Infinity are basically gems, yes? They shine best when enclosed in gold or silver..."

"The armor?!" Tony stilled. "No... a part of the armor!"

"Mhm..."
"A boot? No, no one uses boots for evil schemes these days, so… it must be the gauntlet," the engineer's gaze narrowed, adopting a dangerous glint. "The Infinity fucking gauntlet… and this core can tell us all about it. Or, well, at least what the other me had to fight against…"

"Strategize with me?"

"Only because you asked so nicely."

Tony Stark is and always will be a genius. A visionary. A warrior. Man of Iron.

They watched him chase after a spaceship, save Spiderman's life, team up with a magician and a bunch of aliens… watched him watch everything he cared about turn to dust. Watched his note of farewell… Tony may have splintered the couch hand rest.

Love you 3000…

Then there was the Final Battle.

The Avengers were outnumbered, taken by surprise… Compound? What Compound? That space dreadnought landed straight on his front lawn. At some point reinforcements arrived… Not very reinforcement-y, because Earth had a lot more heroes than that, Tony knew for sure. Somehow they manage to turn the tide… or had Thanos brought only a limited amount of soldiers with him? Either way, the tide is turned, but the Titan still has some aces up his armored sleeve… the man is strong! Insanely. Like a bear during a bear hunt he throws his enemies left and right, goes for the gauntlet, puts it on, snaps his fingers… and nothing happens. Because Stark stole his Stones one moment earlier…

… when Tony snapped his fingers everything worked just fine.

"... this is what we're up against, huh?"

"It would seem…"

"... he didn't use Extremis. Died human, like he wanted to… a man in a can…"

"Have you wanted the same?"

"Once upon a time… our situations are somewhat different, Tasty Freeze. They don't have soulmates where M is from. Plus there are lines that should not be crossed… I wanted to keep you safe, so I crossed them."

"If he used Extremis, would he have survived?"

"I… don't know. He could have, but Extremis wasn't tested to withstand this."

"... I know who Stone's engineer is."

"You mean… M?"

"When she was bathing, I took her clothes… could smell his cologne on them. Distinctive…"

"She is like me then - an escape artist!" his sunshine was proud of his little girl, yet his eyes were dull brown, amber sparks adorning his irises flashing arc reactor blue. "Stone, though… a shame that gala had to be postponed."

“We can always make a private visit…"
“Yes. That would be grand.”

***

They don’t hide Morgan. What’s the point? Let the media speculate! And while they do, they are distracted enough to not focus on much more important things. For instance, why they flew to Germany instead of the Netherlands, where Stark International was building a series of new dams to keep the sea water away from the crops and tulip fields.

They also didn’t try to leave Morgan behind. Again… what’s the point? The safest place for the girl was by their side. And despite being seven winters old, as old man Volk would have put it, Button could hold her own: they’ve seen her tinker with Chitauri crystals (turned out, they were power cores; like miniature nuclear reactors, only… better), wires and scraps using Tony’s spare tools and produce a set of twin bracelets. Separately they shot energy bursts much like alien lances did, but when Button brought her wrists together her ‘Hello Kitty’ jewelry created an energy shield big enough to cover her and one more person… if he stands on one knee or squats.

Their little Munchkin was fearless. Snowflake approved, yet they still had a long talk about safety on the battlefield which too was genius in its simplicity and resorted to one single notion: keep yourself safe to keep your buddy safe. Morgan thought about it and promised to be extra careful.

They posed as tourists first, then checked in a predictably rich hotel… only to sneak out of it, buy an unremarkable German car (economy class, ugh!) and waddled their way East, led by Yakov’s memories, cloaked by Tony’s Extremis…

M sketched the beginnings of what would in the future be called FLUFF-E, while sitting in the back seat among duffel bags with clothing, ammo and explosives. It’s a robotic dog.

Chapter End Notes

We don't really know she inherited her dad's genius mind or not, so I went with the idea that she did)

Tony constructed his first engine (I think it was a motocycle type engine, because he did have a cool looking bike standing in his workshop... correct me if I'm wrong) when he was six, so why wouldn't Morgan be able to reverse engineer alien tech at seven? After the Infinity War Earth should be swamped with it!
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Their travels finally take them to the place where it all began...
Information, old friends... and old enemies.

Chapter Notes

An awkward moment when you find out that Azzano was a city in Italy instead of a prison camp in Germany... >.<
Sorry about that, but it doesn't really influence the story much...

The characters of Rudolph Jager and Andrei Ivolgin were inspired by the characters of the movie "T-34", which was made in 2019) I changed some names here and there, the original characters still belong to their creators, so all is good ;)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y_eRUErIY - the trailer) maybe some even watched the movie with English subs)

P.S. also about the ‘аюшки’ word - it's not actually a word, but rather a sound? when someone asks you something and you humm at him to say that you heard? It's something of this nature - an affirmative sound.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ride is long. The Soldier stops only once at an unremarkable crossroads to point at the beaten up trail snaking its way towards the far away mountains and says:
"From Azzano to Kreischberg."

M's eyes go wide - she heard the stories both from Grandpa Steve and Uncle Bucky. And where one was rather optimistic the other wasn't at all. Tony just nods.

Soon their economy class Volkswagen is wheeling through the forest on a road almost as beat up as the one leading to the old Austrian HYDRA Weapons Facility, where Barnes and other surviving Allied soldiers were kept. The state of it – a clear indicator just how much Germany and Germans want certain parts of their history forgotten.

Yakov was on high alert the moment the last of the highway disappeared around the bend. Tony knew his light had the advantage of several lifetimes’ worth of warrior training which meant some killer instincts, but… he had super-senses too and they had to be worth something. No time like the present to test them out...

"Okay, sugarcake, your Pops is about to do something stupid… do not try this at home!"

Morgan stifled a giggle peeking out from behind her tablet – she just finished working on FLUFF-E’s front legs. Yasha raised a questioning eyebrow in the rearview mirror. Tony took a deep breath,
closed his eyes and let his senses go…

He thought that it would be more of a shock, honestly: the super parts overlapping the mundane, but Tony Stark had been functioning on 120% above the norm for so long, that he didn’t really grasp that big of a difference. Bummer…

Blue eyes in the mirror lit up with a soft humorous glow.

"Do not concentrate on what you hear, Antosha. Concentrate on the sounds that seem out of place."

"Jee thanks, sensei… do you know how many times I've walked in forests? Exactly three: two times with you, and once had to drag an Ironman armor through one in Tennessee."

"Ah, dusha moyya, you are so much better than that…"

"... fine. Here goes again!"

This time he didn’t concentrate at all, just let it flow: the wind playing with the leaves, a myriad of birdsongs, animals… small ones mostly, which wasn't quite right, even he knew this much. Eventually Tony moved past the sounds their ride was making, all the huffs and puffs of the motor, venturing deeper until all he could hear were steady rhythmic beats…

Heartbeats.

Yasha’s, which carried a strong unwavering rhythm, like a metronome. M's heart sounded excited and… weary? It gave a microsecond stutter each time she thought she saw a shape move on the other side of the car window…

Those shapes had heartbeats too. A heavy thump-thump-thump.

"Think it's the evil ones?"

"Evil? No. Hungry."

"… well, that settles the question where did everything bigger than a hedgehog go then."

"It would seem we have two factions in the area: one that refuses to prey on anything but animals, and one that has no qualms about breaking the rules. The loser was exiled into the wild… and probably slaughtered."

"But they're not attacking."

"Not much human left in us to be a tempting meal… Pugovka (Button), though, should stick close."

"Roger that! We will impersonate an artillery turret, won’t we, M?"

The little menace answered with raising her fists in a faux boxer’s stance and a bright smile; the crystals in her bracelets flashed deep purple, charged, armed and ready.

"Хорошо. (Alright then.) We leave the car in twenty minutes."

***

They went off road entirely.

Yakov found trails where there were none, but Tony was still grateful for those several hours they
spent shopping for travel gear. Their mission would have been a lot harder if they didn’t.

Their werewolf guard abandoned them approximately an hour in, ghostlike and morbid. Therefore it was a surprise when the Soldier fired four shots into the shadows without breaking stride and something yelped.

"Я тебя вижу, Дольф. (I see you, Dolf.) Задираться вздумал? (Feeling cocky?) Видать, не все зубы я тебе выбрал в прошлый раз… (Seems, you still have some teeth left after the last time we met…)"

Furious shuffling, and the thump-thump-thump withdrew into the murky wilderness. Only then Tony quietly asked:

"Who's Dolf?"

"He was a guard here. Head of the night shift. Andrei hated him…" Snowflake's voice sounded like he was trying to still himself, hide the emotions this place evoked under sheen of professionalism, but Tony still got glimpses of pain, dread, fear…

*Dogs were barking, someone was screaming in angry German… a column of gangly dirty shapes in striped uniforms marched through the central gates… disappearing in a monster's hungry maw…*

He shook his head furiously, blinking the flashback away. Regret sang in their bond - his light for once couldn't help but project his inner turmoil outward. Tony pushed back with all the love and understanding he could muster.

"Was a guard-man became a guard-dog? Some deal…"

"He liked it. And they always rewarded him well…"

"Andrei… is he one of those two people you told me about?"

"Yes. Andrei Ivolgin… and his soulmate, Rudolph Jager."

"Wait… isn't that a German name?"

"Yes. Rudolph Jager and Gantram Bernstein served together, in the same tank brigade… Bernstein and his Tiger, Jager and his Panther. They weren't friends, but they talked…"

Oh. My. God.

*Oh my God…*

Yakov offered him a crooked grin. Small world…

"Gantram was lucky, Rudolph would often say, because his mate wasn't from an enemy nation they were trying so hard to eradicate… just an American an ocean away. And then he would softly chide Andrei… if he, like you, my sunshine, would say, hauled ass, they could have escaped when he brought down that camp fence on his tank. Andrei, if he had the power to, would sass back, growling about whose fault it was that his kneecap was busted in the first place…"

"They met… on a battlefield!?"

"The German army was advancing, and the Red Army tried to stop them at a small abandoned village called Sebastyanovka. One soviet tank against ten German ones…. Andrei shot them all, damaged the tank Jager was piloting. They had their first tank duel among the ruins of that village…"
shrapnel to the face for Jager, bullet through the knee for Ivolgin."

"That's… some romance!" normal wasn’t for them, it would seem; Tony wasn’t even surprised anymore.

"Что поделаешь… (What can you do…)

There was a lot Yakov wasn't saying. Partly, because of M. Partly, because of him.

Hydra got their hands on a perfectly fine pair of soulmates… and they, the soulmates, weren’t going anywhere, because, like Yakov once said, they were each other’s greatest weakness. There were, probably, experiments, torture, testing… how much they could withstand, how far they could feel, how far the bond could be stretched which meant multiple attempt to break it…

The easy-going mood was flushed out of him as soon as that particular thought sunk in, the Merchant taking over. The yellow lenses of his designer shades hid the dulled out color of his eyes rather well, so M didn’t notice something was amiss. The Soldier, though…

They will have to talk about it later.

"If they're in ice boxes similar to yours, then the chances that they are alive are pretty high. I took it apart, and, what do you know, it turned out to be quite the sophisticated piece of equipment… for a 1950s era piece."

"Hope is illusive here… and also untrustworthy."

"Not hope, baby, but fact."

"Uncle Yasha?"

"Аюшки? (Yes?)"

"Are your friends like you?"

"Can they lift couches one-handed, you mean?"

Yep, that totally happened. Tony was so engrossed in long distance company management (they had to put up an appearance that they visited Germany with some sort of ‘intent’; plus, Tony realized that he hadn’t received word from the European branch of Stark International in quite some time – what were these guys even up to?) that when he reached for his coffee cup and found himself several feet in the air he almost threw his starkphone at somebody with a startled whoa! Later, when the indignant yelling surrendered to snickers and grins and jokes, behold the great reveal: his two best people were TV-remote hunting.

… and he absolutely didn’t see Yakov hiding the blasted thing behind the giant ficus plant from the corner of his eye an hour or two ago, nope. Adults against children conspiracy in action, but you have to admit - Snowflake had very interesting educational methods… they actually made the kid think!

"Yeah! Grandpa Steve could too, but he's old now."

"Sadly, no. If anything they are like your father - technology manipulators."

"But he doesn't do that by himself - Friday helps him."

"Hey!" Tony fought off a pout; kids these days – zero respect! On second thought, he wasn’t much
better.

“Do they have their own Friday to help them?”

“Oh, no… their abilities do not work like that. To control something they need to take it apart first… and put it back together.”

“Neat! But you need to learn lots of things about lots of things…”

“Education is important, Pugovka (Button). You go to school?”

“A little,” when both men turn to her with eyebrows that are raised equally high, Morgan is quick to elaborate: “I skipped a couple of grades is all…”

“… a couple?”

“Like… ten?”

Well, Tony did enroll into MIT at fifteen.

“Have you picked out a university yet?” he had to ask.

“Um… I was thinking… maybe New York University? They have courses on engineering…”

“Nice one! And you wouldn’t have to live in a dorm.”

“Mom… before the accident… thought I would choose MIT.”

“Sweet pie, you can study wherever and whatever you want – as long as you’re comfortable doing it, okay?”

The girl suddenly turned shy.

“…okay.”

***

She wanted to be fashion designer. Take on a second major and make fashion accessories and with the knack for magic jewelry M already had? Might even work…

Tony personally was determined to believe in their little menace no matter what. With Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts, the Goddess of Style incarnate, as her mother? That part of her college life might as well be covered… it was the engineering he was worried about – not a very woman-friendly field, even now.

They hiked on: Yakov in the lead, Tony a few steps behind, M comfortably sitting on his left arm, suitcase armor in his right. He could feel the hum of something big and mechanical in the distance. Old technology, early age computers, running what was left of the base after Captain America happened to it. Tony wondered what would they find: a crater or the opposite in form of a big mound of rubble.

His light was calmer. Their chatter about New York’s selection of colleges and what they have to offer (even if M already made up her mind) somehow appeared to be soothing.

A drop of normality in the sea of insane…
Tony understands.

***

“We’re here.”

They were standing inside a giant cave. Well, no, not exactly a cave, because this cavern was obviously man-made. The darkness inside was thick as ink: the lights were out, generators offline. Tony heard a constant drip-drip-drip of water trickling down a hard edge and shattering… he smelt rust and mold.

“Metal?”

“Stone. The gates are made of stone.”

“On metallic framing, no doubt… rusty. We’ll have to pry them open by force…”

“Coded lock.”

“Oh? Thinking it still works, it’ll give us an easy entry point… to end up where exactly, Snowflake?”

“Garage. They never kept them far from their…”

“Machines?”

“Yes. Project ‘Alpha’ was about creating the perfect biological weapon. The Ghost Program was about creating the perfect technological weapon. The bionic arm equipped on James was based on its results…”

“Direct neural connection?” Tony frowned. “Like the one J.B. had or… like the one you had?”

“I don’t know. Maybe things have changed…”

“Well, one could only hope, because if it’s the second variant, we’ll need them in a jet and hospitalized until I cook up a suitable treatment… what is their weapon of choice?”

“It was determined by trial and error that objects which the pilot has an emotional attachment to bring out the best responses…”

“… tanks?” the engineer leveled his soulmate with an incredulous stare. “They wired them directly into their tanks?!”

“That was the idea…”

“I sense a ‘but’ in there.”

“And you would be right. They created something similar to an AI for their machines, an additional controlling mechanism…”

“That ‘but’ is getting bigger.”

“They were not as advanced as the AI you create or as Mister D, but for their time… they were smart.”

“If they were made learning AI’s they might be just as smart even after 70 years of standby, if those
Hydra scientists hadn’t shut them down, of course…” Tony slid in full mechanic mode. “I’ll try finding them… they have names?”

“Dietrich, the Panther… and Tishka, the T-34.”

Tony involuntarily smiled, because… damn, these guys already seemed fun. A former German officer, probably, an aristocrat, probably, the older one, so of course, he would name his machine something grand. And the Russian… practically a boy that only yesterday was playing soccer with his friends in the yard, would name a tank after what might have been his house cat.

“M, keep close. I don’t trust that guy Dolf as far as I can through him.”

The girl snuggled closer. She wasn’t clinging to his pants leg to not hinder his freedom of movement, but was close enough for him to blast any danger coming her way in the face.

“Knowing him… he ran off to collect the others,” Yakov was all the way ‘weapon’ by now, the man in him taking a step back. “An ambush is to be expected.”

“How many?”

“The Captain took out about half of them, when he and his team went through the front gates and destroyed the on ground levels of the compound. Who were below ground, crawled out through the ruins… and they could just as easily crawl back in once we start searching the underground levels for information on the case of one Arseniy Kotov.”

“Fantastic.”

“We will have to be… sneaky, but… one problem at a time.”

Tony agrees.

“One problem at a time.”

They try the coded lock. Surprisingly, it works and the wall of stone that makes the hangar doors shudders, sliding to the side… and more darkness seeps out, black as ink. Yakov leads them in, past wrecked and rusted trucks, past once luxurious cars and armored vehicles, slouched to one side, lighting their way with pocket flashlights.

…it is Morgan who sees Tishka first. The tank, the Russian T-34, looks broken. There are holes in its side, the tracks are ripped, but its cannon is pointed towards the entrance and the machine gun installed in its front looks ready to fight. Tony reaches out with his mind, but hears nothing… the tank is dead. Or seems dead.

Russians are always up to something.

Tony stilled. Where did that thought come from?

“Yasha?”

“Yes?”

“Something is alive in here… and it’s not Tishka. The guy looks like he is straight out of battle…”

Yakov examines the entry points of the shots and says:

“Relatively fresh… they tried to escape… again. Andrei never gives up… very contagious.”
“Ha! That’s a trait you share, love of mine.”

“Must be a Russian thing…” the Soldier pauses. “I never thanked you… for saving Chijik and the rest.”

“Oh, so you did talk! It was quiet and I’ve wondered…”

“I was thoroughly chided: first by Chijik, then by Modya… Boris just shook his head. He was always the silent one.”

“They’re staying?”

“Borya calls it a support mission. Do you remember Captain Miller? You gave him a pair of legs to walk on.”

“Yeah?”

“His soulmate, the one who left him, showed up after he saw him on television, begged Miller to take him back… didn’t even care to hide the gold band on his ring finger. Chijik’s boy punched him in the face.”

Ouch! Sasha had a heavy hand.

“How did Miller take it?”

“Nervous breakdown. But he is strong, he will pull through.”

Morgan suddenly pulls on his jacket sleeve, while staring wide-eyed somewhere to their left.

“Daddy, what’s that?”

Tony follows the direction of their girl’s gaze… and finds himself on the other end of a gun barrel… a very big gun barrel… 75mm tank cannon barrel, to be precise. Can’t really fault him for going a little pale… a wave of calmness from Yakov is more than welcome and he latches onto it to ground himself.

The Soldier’s voice is deceptively blank when he says:

“Hello, Dietrich.”

The tank revs its motor in a low angry sounding rumble. He doesn’t really share the sentiment. Tony despite the drama of the moment is puzzled. He still can’t hear him in spite the tank being right there…

Shielding? Nope. But they could work on a different frequency. A few minutes of mental tweaking proved him right. What he hears is both fascinating (AI!) and disturbing (AI…).

Hostile presence detected. Elimination sanctioned.


Subject Alpha confirmed permanently decommissioned. Civilians have no clearance – presence questioned. Directive ‘Protect Pilot One’ – status active?

Directive ‘Protect Pilot Two’ – status active confirmed. Designation ‘Dietrich’ reassigned to

Designation ‘Tishka’ reassigned to ‘Too trusting’.

“Dusha moya?” Yakov noticed his spaced out state.

“They’re talking. Dietrich wants to kill us for several reasons, because he is suspicious like that and saw you… die. Tishka says he’s wrong and should get his optics checked,” Tony smirked. “Called him a lummox…”

“Yes, that is about right…”

“Should I ask them? About their pilots.”

“It won’t hurt.”

Tony nodded and hacked his way into their tight little network. The reaction was instantaneous – both AI first went radio silent, then changed frequencies leaving the engineer in the dust. All he could was shout an alarmed ‘Hey!’ at their retreating backs.

“Oh come on! I just want to talk to you!”

Intruder alert!

Intruder alert!

“Intruder my ass… we’re the rescue team!”

Access not authorized.

Civilian has no authorized access.

“Okay, who should we snuff to get our access authorized? I’ll personally chop off his thumb!”

Civilian is exercising emotion… rage?

Negative. Pilot One calls such display ‘sarcasm’.

Reasoning questionable.

Affirmative.

“It’s good that you think we have the time to discuss this, but… there are a bunch of hungry werewolves out there with nothing big enough in that forest to sustain their burning metabolism. You think they’ll be too grossed out to do some digging and pry open some cryo-tubes?”

That silences them. It’s not a very good silence, and Tony feels his gut churn. Unknowingly, he hit the nail on the head…

The radio next to the wreckage that was Tishka suddenly came alive, making both Morgan and Tony jump. The levels of static were overwhelming, but then somebody tweaked the controller and they heard a distinctive robotic voice… two robotic voices, speaking in unison, one with a German accent, the other – with a Russian one:

“Security breach detected at 14:00 hours, four days from the start of the current month. Seven cryo-
tubes were compromised. Security breach detected at 10:00 hours, seven days to the end of the past month. Two cryo-tubes were compromised. Security breach detected at 02:00 hours, four days from the beginning of the month past the past month…”

“Stop! I… got the message,” and boy did he…

Morgan was scared, clinging closer: not a kid-genius, just… a kid, who has seen too much, heard too much, experienced too much. Yakov was howling on the inside: all sorrow, sadness and red-hot rage, coiling tighter and tighter, like a spring… or a snake ready to strike.

“How many cryo-tubes were compromised?”

“Thirty-four.”

“How many were there in total?”

“Forty-five.”

“…”!


“It’s not your fault, Mister Dietrich,” talking tanks didn’t really phase their little girl; she grew up around Friday after all.

“Human child sees logic. You should listen. What would she know? She is too young.”

“Guys… focus!”

“Following the trail of bodies is highly advisable. Impossible to miss,” said the radio with a heavy German accent, then after a bit of static it continued, now with a heavy Russian accent. “Be weary. The compound computer is still functioning.”

“How do you reach them?”

“Dietrich can take you. Twenty minutes till the hour he begins his patrol.”

“Um… we hide inside?”

“Yes.”

No one is particularly happy – the Panther is extremely protective of its pilot – but for the greater cause, they endure. Tony never sat inside a tank before, never mind a WWII era one, but the Panther was initially a five-man machine, so between Tony and M they had plenty of room. The racket from the engine was hellish - no wonder all the soldiers on those war era photos were either in helmets or in headphones.

The Soldier doesn’t go with them, disappearing into the shadows instead.

The Wolf goes hunting.

Chapter End Notes
The Panther

T-34
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/42/Char_T-34.jpg

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