A Prosthetic Heart

by ZombieliciousXIII

Summary

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Hello everyone! I hope y'all enjoy this story as much as I did writing it, it was a long time in the making but it's finally here! I love to know your thoughts, comments, etc... going forward! This first chapter's title was from the song by Marina and the Diamonds by the same name!

See the end of the work for more notes.
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by the same name!

It was almost blinding, the flashes, it felt like there were thousands of them; Bucky would swear they
surrounded him - it was at times like these he was surprised his PTSD hadn’t decided to viciously
strike, but then again, trauma was a vindictively unpredictable bitch that way. He arched his back,
allowing his jaw to slack just enough for his lips to part ever so slightly; the key was for the
expression to look effortless, and less like a fish out of water - Bucky had the look down in spades,
or so he’d been told (though Natasha would argue that point at least once every other shoot).

James Buchanan Barnes was known to be the perfect mix of ‘enticingly innocent’ and ‘criminally
handsome’, something that was known as the ‘Deadly Combo’ in the business, but to Bucky it was
just a façade he’d learned to do his job well enough. Just another skill that was otherwise useless to
him outside of photoshoots and work-related public events; the skills Bucky learned through his
modeling, to him, were akin to knowing how to roll a quarter up and down one’s knuckles - a neat
party trick, but virtually useless in day-to-day life.

He felt a trickle of sweat run down his spine, his left clavicle already groaning in annoyance, and
knew he’d need a break soon lest his expression of ‘fuck me’ soon turned to one of ‘fuck off’ at
those who viewed it.

“You’re doing great Bucky,” the photographer, Jessica Jones, praised as she scrolled through the
shots she’d already taken. “Alright, let’s take five, and then we’ll finish up.”

*Thank fuck,* is all Bucky can think as he sits up from his laid back position, left shoulder aching from
where he’d had to lean on it for certain photos; rolling his artificial shoulder, Bucky hears a dull *pop*
that makes him wince while the grafted skin over the metal plating throbs - it’s a minor pain, more of
an annoyance than anything at this point, nothing to worry about (yet). After all, after years of pain,
you begin grow used to it; at least that’s what he said to himself, *had* to tell himself, especially on
nights when the pain brought him to tears.

Running a hand through his mane, and undoubtedly ruining his ‘artfully mussed’ hair, Bucky already
knows the make up and hair artists were probably giving him dirty looks for messing with their
work, but he was too tired to care; he grimaces at the amount of product he feels against the skin of
his right palm. Photoshoots always quickly grew boring when done alone, in groups at least the other
models - if they weren’t his bandmates, because *that* was always a fun time, for *them*, at least - kept
each other company, but then again Bucky wasn’t really a model - professionally at least; though his
‘alternative’ look (if that’s what you called having a metal arm) tended to type-cast him for certain
gigs. However, Bucky Barnes was first and foremost a musician (at least, by way of side-gigs),
things like this were really just a happenstance of the job, but he didn’t mind the odd shoot here and
there for an extra buck, or to promote a cause he believed in - if it raised money, or even just
awareness, Bucky was all for it.

Ever since his less-than-whole return from his final tour in Afghanistan, the young veteran and his friends turned to music as a means of therapy and escape, his band - named the ‘The Howling Commandos’ after their platoon - were comprised of the primary group he served with. They were just a group of broken misfits but they were his; starting out as a ragtag group of strangers that quickly turned into his best friends, their bond cementing out there on the frontlines; his unlikely family. War was funny like that, throw death at someone and watch their true colors shine through; it was a heart breaking site to behold, watching your best friends take a bullet for you, praying they’d make it through the night because they were a damn good person and believed you were worth saving.

It was hard to believe, even after so many years, that those days were over - even if their patchwork family never would.

The brunet wandered over to the snack table and snatched up one of the complimentary cookies for the models and crew, then heads over to his agent, “this shouldn’t go one for much longer, Ms. Jones may be a bit of a perfectionist, but she doesn’t needlessly run on,” Coulson reassures him, handing him his phone.

“Thanks Phil,” Bucky smiles through a mouthful of chocolate chip goodness, “any other upcoming shoots or events?”

Coulson was the Howling Commandos’ manager, but he was also their liaison between them and SHIELD Security for freelance gigs; hey, just because the band was doing okay, didn’t mean it paid all - if any - of the bills. Phil had…discovered - yeah, that was the easiest way to explain it; trying to explain that Phil had busted down Clint’s garage door, demanding they end their band practice, right before handing them his business card just took too much time to rehash every time someone asked - Bucky and his friends, he’d helped them not only re-acclimate to regular society, but helped them get jobs all throughout. Bucky would never know what made Phil take them under his wings, but the man did with no hidden agenda - if a little strong-arming, in the beginning - and Bucky knew they’d never be able to pay him back for all he’d done for them, not really. The kicker? Bucky didn’t think Coulson would accept it, if they tried.

The middle aged man looks down at his own phone, tapping at the screen for a moment before humming, “actually yes, for both; there’s a request for you and Clint from Stark Industries,” to say Bucky’s interest was piqued was putting it mildly, “they’re releasing a new line of prosthetics and are looking for models to promote them, vets in particular, at the annual Maria Stark Foundation gala on December sixteenth.”

Bucky feels his shoulder twinge from where his current prosthetic pinches into his skin and muscle (it never ‘sat right’, no matter what the arm’s technicians said about ‘giving it time’, it’s been years, how much more fucking ‘time’ does it need?), while Hammer Tech wasn’t as top-tier as Stark tech - by a long shot, really - it was the only thing he could afford at the time. Bucky rolls the idea around in his mind, weighing the pros and cons of the proposition. Cons: working with Tony Stark was… less than favorable to Bucky, and knew without a doubt Steve would take issue at the very mention of the man - and Bucky would likely be right there with him. Pros: he needed an upgrade on his arm, or at the very least a cleaning job as the arm was starting to act up more and more lately, making simple tasks that much more irritating - if not outright difficult and painful. However, that brought up costs; sure Bucky made more now between the band, modeling, and freelancing at SHIELD Security than he did after leaving the army, but that didn’t mean he could afford to just throw cash around. Ever the - eerily perfect - professional he was, Coulson speaks up once more, and Bucky just knows Phil was somehow reading his mind as he goes on to address his worries.
“All models receive free prosthetics from the new line and/or upgrades if they’re already equipped with Stark tech; Clint already agreed, and invitation says your welcome to bring friends to the opening, as well as to Mr. Stark’s workshop for moral and emotional support, therapy pets included.”

Coulson studies his long time client - friend? Surely by now they were ‘friends’, but Coulson was nothing if not hard to read - is face, which was something Bucky always appreciated about the man; no matter how good - or bad - the opportunity was for his career, Coulson wouldn’t do anything without Bucky’s - or his friends’ - explicit permission.

“Sure,” the veteran nods after a moment, shoving the remainder of the cookie into his mouth, if for no reason than just to see Phil grimace, “puf me ‘ow as one of ‘he mofels.”

Coulson says nothing (there’s the grossed out look Bucky was aiming for), instead tapping away with dizzying efficiency at his phone for a few seconds, “it’s set.” Coulson holds out his hand for a moment, palm up, “you have an appointment with Mr. Stark next Monday at noon for a consultation,” Bucky places his phone on the offered hand wondering how the hell Phil managed to set up the appointment so fast - sometimes Bucky seriously believed Coulson was some kind of cyborg, it really was the only explanation. Plus, if he was right, Clint and Steve owed him a hundred bucks, each.

“Allright, I can get there on my own, can you just-”

“- this isn’t amateur hour, James.” Bucky hated it when Coulson called him that, but it was expected, given Bucky was pretty sure he’d accidentally flung some crumbs onto Phil’s impeccable suit while being gross, “I already sent the directions and instructions to your email,” Coulson cuts in with an eye roll that could rival Natasha’s.

Yup, cyborg, seriously no doubt about it.

Then again, who was Bucky to talk? He was technically part machine himself, just less efficient than Coulson - much to the man’s chagrin and irritation.

“You’re the best, Phil!” Bucky announces loud enough to turn a few heads, firing off finger-pistols at his cyborg-manager, grinning broadly when he sees the corner of Coulson’s lip twitch - it was close enough to a grin that Bucky counted it as a win.

Bucky chats with Coulson for a few more minutes about what he meeting with Stark will entail, only turning on his heels and heading back to set when Jess announces it’s time to get back to work, letting hair and make up fuss over him before getting into his instructed positions. A chart-topping pop song plays faintly in the background, loud enough to immerse himself it’s beats, but not so loud he couldn’t hear Jessica’s directions - it’s a good enough distraction, but not one that fully silences his thoughts. Bucky lets his wandering mind meander, moving on autopilot, and wonders if his new prothesis will be as uncomfortable as the one currently hanging heavy off his shoulder - he silently hopes not, but knows he’d take whatever he could get. Beggars can’t be choosers, and all that. However, somehow his bigger worry is if he’ll be able to put up with Stark long enough to even get the upgrade, you’ll have to, Barnes, you can’t keep going with this hunk of scrap metal for much longer.

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Tony waltzes out of the board meeting with as much gusto as is expected of him, humming and
noding where needed while listening as Pepper rambles on about her bubbling ideas for the re-
establishment of the Stark Expo, an infant of a concept, but if anyone can make an idea come to life 
within a year of it’s conception it’s Virginia Potts. Pepper Potts was as beautiful as she was doggedly 
persistent, almost ruthless in her determination, and wasn’t that just one of the many reason to adore 
her? Because Tony knew it was most certainly one of his. The truth was, Tony didn’t even need to 
be involved, this was Pepper’s project more than it was his, much like the Queen, Tony knew he was 
just the figurehead of Stark Industries; without Pepper, he knew, it would fall apart within a matter of 
hours. However, just before they’re able to reach Tony’s office a wave of dizziness washes over 
him, almost powerful enough to make his steps falter - noticeably, at least. Man would Pepper tear 
him a new one if she thought he was drunk so early in the day, well…it wouldn’t be the first time, 
but he really was trying not to worry her more than necessary - really.

“I gotta take a whizz,” the brunet says, turning on his heels towards the nearest restroom. “Meet me 
in the office in ten, I have something I need to go over with you.”

Tony swears he hears her eyes roll, and can’t help but grin when she calls out, “I swear if it’s another 
scandal I’m throwing you out the window, Anthony!”

“You love me too much!” Tony throws over his shoulder with a grin, knowing his lack of denial or 
confirmation will grate on her nerves until he’s back to sooth her ruffled feathers - fuck, he’ll miss 
this.

Tony pushes into the tower’s lavatory, a quick scan tells him he’s alone, after locking the door to 
keep it that way he leans against it. A fumble in his grey slacks’ pockets produces the device he’d 
been looking for; his Blood Toxicity Meter, a little creation he’d made once the fucked up Etch A 
Sketch started appearing on his skin - the twisted sister of a blood-sugar meter of his own making. 
Speaking of, I wonder how Snider’s doing these days, Stark thinks in passing as he presses his thumb 
against he device is reader, hissing when he feels the prick before jamming the digit into his mouth. It 
takes about two seconds before the red lettering reads BLOOD TOXICITY 19%, the brunet sighs; 
he’s running out of time, slowly, but it’s happening. He has time until he needs to change out the 
core, the dizziness just a warning, but right now Tony knew he needed to get his blood sugar up if he 
wants to stay on his feet. Pushing off the bathroom’s door, the inventor unlocks it and heads back 
towards his office, catching the tale end of a tender conversation; Pepper’s blue eyes snap over to 
Tony, quickly muttering a goodbye, she ends the call and Tony can’t help but grin like a child.

Making his way over to his office’s mini fridge, the engineer raises a brown at his best friend, “how’s 
Happy?”

“He’s fine, can we get back to work now?” The brunet will forever be thankful for Pepper’s fair 
skin, selfishly drinking in the adorable way she flushes despite rolling her eyes, and cracks open a 
can of Dr. Pepper - it wasn’t intentional, but Pepper’s fond glare at the can just makes him smile 
wider - before snatching up the bottle of champagne he’d loaded into it the night before.

“Actually,” Tony starts, moving to sit across from Pepper, “we’re done working today, now we’re 
celebrating.”

“What do you mean ‘done’? Tony, you can’t think about drinking now, it’s ten in the morning! We 
have to get started on the preparations for the Foundation’s gala-”

“-Pepper you’re officially running the company now-”

“-that’s what I’m trying to do, Tony. I mean the planning for the Expo has only just begun, we’re 
barely making it on time for the reveal of Stark Prosthetics and-”
“-Pepper you’re not listening to me, I’m asking you to run the company-”

“-Tony that’s what I’m trying to do! You still have so many of the models to see and the full layout for the Expo-”

“-Virginia Potts I’m trying to ask you to be CEO!”

“-isn’t even complete…yet…have you been drinking?”

Tony can’t help it, he laughs, “no, but we’re about to,” moving to grab two flutes for the champagne the brunet continues, “I mean it’s been coming for a while now, it’s what you basically do, so why not make it official so you have the paycheck and title to match?”

Pepper stares at Tony, slightly dumbfounded if he says so himself, and Tony’s inner child punches the air at finally being able to leave Ms. Potts speechless. Filling both flutes before waltzing over and handing one to Pepper who takes the delicate glass, staring at Tony with far too many emotions in her eyes for him to decipher, but he dismisses them all and smiles.

Lifting his glass, Tony announces, “I hear by officially announce that, one Virginia Potts, is now the Chairman and CEO of Stark Industries, effective immediately.”

“Tony are you-”

“Sure?” He cuts in, guessing her question, sipping at the bubbly drink and chases it down with Dr. Pepper - Tony’s a connoisseur that way - as he nods. “I’ve been sure for about a year now, just needed the time to get things in order, so that you,” he pauses, moving back to his desk to switch out his flute glass for a contract and pen, before returning to - a still gaping - Pepper, “only had to sign on the dotted line…and thumb the thumbprint thingy, but that sounded less charming.”

Pepper’s mouth works, her words stuttering before a soft but wet laugh escapes her, “Tony, I don’t…I don’t know what to think-”

“Don’t think, just sign,” he chuckles softly, handing her the pen and watches her scrawl out her name onto the eggshell colored paper, thumbprint neatly printed onto the paper moments later. “Congratulations Miss CEO,” Tony grins, switching out the contract for his glass of champagne before clinking it against Pepper’s, “the company is lucky to have you.”

Pepper laughs, nearly choking Tony when she suddenly wraps her spindly arms around him, but the brunet revels in the feeling and hugs her back just as tightly.

“And because I’m the most awesome person in the world, I gave Happy the rest of the day off,” Tony informs her as he pulls back, grinning at Pepper - more so when she filches just that much more, “go celebrate, lord knows you deserve it.”

“Tony I- are you sure?”

“Yes,” Tony chuckles, kissing her cheek before waving out of his office, “now get.”

Pepper hugs him again, somehow tighter this time but Tony represses the urge to flinch at the way it makes his chest ache, because Pepper was damn well worth a little pain. Stark watches fondly as Pepper sets off, phone already in-hand as she leaves the office, spouting off the news to Happy. Tony sits back on his office couch sipping at his champagne, watching Pepper’s petite form disappear around a corner, and thinks yeah…she’ll be okay. Pepper deserved this, there was never a question in Tony’s mind about it, he trusted her with his legacy and knew she’d go forward to build one of her own; least to say, it was the right step forward to fixing his mistakes before he was buried
six feet under.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of my first WinterIron story!! See you next chapter!
xxoxoo
Bucky believes he's a good man, or at least, that he's trying to be one. However, what he does know, is that Stark is in no way on the side of the angels.

The rest of Bucky’s week passes by in a blur of lazing around his apartment, lyric writing, filling out paper work for his last gig with SHIELD, and - not so secretly - researching Tony Stark. Apparently the once war mongering business man really did leave behind the weapons game after his abduction in Afghanistan, seemingly trying to make amends for his past despite military and public outcry, but there was nothing out there about what had occurred during his capture that explained what lead to such a drastic change. With every interview Bucky watched and read with Tony Stark, the man was a damn near magician at dodging questions about the events of his stint in Afghanistan, and despite interviewer after interviewer pushing him for an answer, he never gave one. Tabloids in particular seemed to have it out for Stark, at times going as far as to call him ‘a traitor of the country’ (damn vultures are always out for blood, aren’t they?), though Bucky saw through their reasons easily enough; after all, Tony Stark was a near daily headliner for tabloids to exploit for years, and it was clear that the now reformed playboy meant their sales likely dropped.

All the while, there was a part of Bucky that knew he should probably hold some level of contempt for Stark, after all it was the man’s mishandling of his weapons that lead the former soldier to losing his left arm, and yet…there just wasn’t any. Steve had every right to hate the man, and Bucky could fully understand why, but if the few sparse sessions of therapy had taught Bucky anything it was that holding a grudge just held him back. So with each article and interview he watched of the man, he couldn’t help but see that Stark really was trying to make up for the betrayal of his former business partner - and those that had been hurt in the crossfire - as best as he knew how.

“Mr. Barnes?” A woman’s voice pulls Bucky out of his thoughts, and is greeted by a redhead - Potts, he recognizes, from his research (yeah, let's call it ‘research’), standing he greets her with a smile.

“Bucky, please,” he says, holding out a hand which she takes with a smile of her own, and the brunet can’t help but immediately hold respect for her - the strawberry blond reminding him of Natasha in many admirable ways.

“Call me Pepper, then,” she says with a grin, breaking the contact to lead him to the Stark Tower elevator, “the elevator will take you directly to Mr. Stark’s workshop.”

Bucky stepped into the carriage at Pepper’s direction, and for a moment felt a little worried when he
didn’t see any buttons on the sleek metal paneling, but almost immediately after the doors had slid closed the elevator began to move without hesitation in it’s automatic ascension to a higher floor. The familiar sounds of Alice Cooper is the first thing to greet Bucky, and the brunet - unsurprisingly - finds himself relaxing fractionally at the familiarity of the music as he steps out of the elevator, only to stop in his tracks when no one greets him. There’s an awkward moment of standing like a lost child by the elevator’s doors until Bucky forces himself to move forward, taking in his surroundings as he moves further into the workshop; it’s a high-tech but messy area, though soon enough his efforts are rewarded when he sees a man hunched over a work bench with safety goggles secured on his face as he welds - and…talks to? - a piece of metal.

In just a moment Bucky finds himself fascinated, and is content to silently watch the man work for a few minutes, at least that’s what he’d meant to do; instead, what happens is the shorter man notices Bucky, and proceeds to flip right the fuck out. Bucky knew he should have been a bit more gracious, but he couldn’t help the snort that escapes him when the man yelps and snatches a hand back from his work, sucking at the skin in between his index and thumb as he glares between Bucky and the heated metal as though he doesn’t know which he’s more pissed at.

“Mr. Stark, your appointment has arrived,” a voice announces a second later as the music lowers, making Bucky flinch and look for the source of the voice, leaving him a little unnerved when he still only sees Stark.

“Wow JARV, astute as ever, how about next time you let me know that before my myocardial infarction?” The stocky engineer grousers with a glare at Bucky, the look holding no real heat, but it’s under that gaze that Bucky suddenly finds himself sobering - almost as though he’d been doused with ice water. “You’re James Barnes, I take it?”

“You’d be right,” Bucky answers, his voice slightly more biting than he’d meant for it to be, and… okay, so maybe Bucky wasn’t as forgiving as he believed himself to be, but could he really be blamed for not wanting to be friendly with Stark?

Anthony Stark was as much to blame for Bucky losing his arm as the people who fired the weapons, as responsible for Clint nearly going deaf as the men who bombed them were; Stark had gotten out of Afghanistan scot-free while people like Bucky, his team, and innocent civilians suffered the consequences. Maybe Bucky wasn’t the forgiving man he’d given himself credit earlier for being, but he’d been damned if he thought less of himself for holding someone’s ignorance to their face and demanding they be responsible for it, especially when innocent people paid the price.

“So what makes a war profiteer suddenly turn to prosthetics?” Bucky questions, stormy eyes watching the brunet, almost circling the engineer like a predator hunting its prey; when Stark flinches, Bucky can’t help but think, good. “I doubt gluing broken vets back together is as profitable as building weapons was,” it wasn’t a question, they both knew it, but Stark shrugs and answers anyway.

“Less ambitious in my old age, dear,” the words are stale, sarcastic and deflecting, emotionless and they irk Bucky; they’re a clear lie, and the singer finds himself wanting to dig more.

Bucky steps into Stark’s personal space, the man doesn’t step back or break his gaze with the taller’s grey, but there’s no fear or anger there, either. Bucky isn’t sure how he feels about that. Does this man simply not care about what he’s done? Does he feel any remorse for the lives he’s ruined - if not ended - with his relentless ‘innovations’ in destruction? What was the purpose of this whole program? A way to soothe this guilt? Stroke his ego? To strut around like he was the ‘good guy’ in all this when he was the cause of Bucky’s constant pain, even now?

“Why start this program now? Your past finally catching up with you?” It was stupid, so stupid to
goad the person he was supposed to be sucking up to, even if only to get something out of it, but now that he’s started Bucky couldn’t stop himself. “You’re the reason I lost my fucking arm, Stark, and now you hope the people you’ve hurt will forgive you just because you’re giving us fancy toys?”

Bucky was going to be kicked out, be told to fuck off, he just knew it-

“I never asked for forgiveness,” Stark bites out, hand coming up to rub at his sternum, and there’s still no anger there, just…acquiescence. Defeat.

Somehow, that only angers Bucky more. Do you want him to fight you, is that it? You want him to be the asshole you think he is? Bucky wonders, and maybe…maybe that’s what he did want, what he’d unconsciously prepared for before coming here, and was somehow let down when Stark all but rolled over when Bucky started in on him - where was the man he’d watched in the interviews? The man who was as quick-witted as he was unapologetic when facing the world? Shouldn’t he be more relieved that Stark wasn’t the man he thought he was? The man he’d seen in interviews the past week that seemed almost dizzyingly self-centered, sarcastic, and gaudy in his representation to the world?

“Unless you’re going to punch me, I think we should get started,” Stark begins, cutting into Bucky’s thoughts, and moves towards his ’shop’s work station. “JARVIS, what you have on Mr. Barnes here?”

“James Buchanan Barnes, age twenty-nine,” the voice from earlier begins, accompanied by a holographic display appearing with his file, this time Bucky’s a bit more prepared for the voice, “former military, current freelance security at SHIELD Security, part-time musician and model, currently fitted with a second generation Hammer Technology arm-”

Stark abruptly whips his head towards Bucky with a sneer directed at his arm, as though the prosthesis had somehow personally insulted him and his ancestors, “Hammer Tech?!” He all but hisses, marching over to unceremoniously take Bucky’s left arm in his hands, turning it this way and that - Bucky thinks he should be offended, but can’t help feeling amused despite himself; Stark doesn’t only look appalled, but offended on Bucky’s behalf.

“Okay, this needs to be fixed, like, yesterday; no one deserves to suffer through that baboon’s excuse of ‘tech’,” Stark rambles on, walking back over to the hologram and sifts through the pale blue writing, and Bucky wonders if Stark really does reads as fast as he’s flicking through his information - a part of him knows the man likely does, being a ‘genius’ and all.

It startles Bucky slightly how much he’s just waiting for a glaring side-eye from Stark, or a simple sneer, anything to keep the fire in his belly going to hate the man. There’s nothing. Every time Stark glances at Bucky it’s always at his arm, the look more calculating, more thoughtful than pitiful or resentful. Barnes knows he can loathe the man on principal alone, lord knows Steve does, but with every curious glance and argument with the disembodied voice about ways to improve Bucky’s arm, the brunet is ashamed to say his resolve to fight with Stark is slowly waning.

So, Bucky continues to stare.

Barnes watches the shorter brunet work, a little taken with how ‘in his element’ Stark seems to be, and doesn’t bother to stop himself from allowing his eyes to rake over the man’s body. Stark wears his ratty jeans and faded Guns and Roses tee with a level of careless confidence Bucky can’t help but admire - almost akin to how he used to hold himself, before enlisting. However, his eyes pause on the center of Stark’s chest, the dark fabric of his shirt somehow slightly lighter in the center, and he wonders if maybe it’s just a trick of light messing with him.
“I start a scan on Hammer’s excuse of a prosthetic, no offense,” he adds offendedly, casting a glance at Bucky. “I want to know how much of Justin’s fuck ups I have to fix, also, check the neural interfacing; just from looking at it I know this thing’s a lot more invasive than it seems,” Stark says to the disembodied voice, flicking away Bucky’s file and instead folds his arms over his chest as new information begins to fill out before him.

“Certainly, Sir.”

“Okay, seriously, what is that?” Bucky blurts out, unable to stop himself, for the first time since pulling up Bucky’s information Stark looks at him - really looks at him; Stark’s confusion only lasts a split second, though.

“Oh, that’s my AI, JARVIS, he basically runs everything Pepper doesn’t,” Stark answers as though the simple response explains it all, turning his attention back to the hologram that now has an outline of Bucky’s prosthetic on it. “The arm was attached through surgery, right?”

Bucky nods, right hand unconsciously moving to rest on his left shoulder, “yeah, they said something about nerve-connectors an’ shit.”

“It seems the prosthetic, beyond the rotator cuff, is detachable. The invasive non-detachable aspects, however, extend from Mr. Barnes’ trapezius and pectoralis major down to his serratus anterior, encompassing nearly everything between; as there are several more non-detachable sections, I have highlighted on Mr. Barnes is scans.”

Bucky can barely keep up with everything the AI is saying, though the way his scan lights up like a goddamn Christmas tree makes his insides coil with anxiety and dread, what have I gotten myself into?

“From the file,” JARVIS continues, “I gather that the surgically attached aspects of the prothesis is connected to Mr. Barnes’ neural interface and nervous system. The arm itself can be easily detached and upgraded in the lab through non-invasive means, so long as the connectors are properly aligned. However, as the Hammer Technology prosthetic is not the latest version, I would recommend that Mr. Barnes have neural-interface upgrades, as well as replacement upgrades of the non-detachable aspects of the prosthesis with Stark technology in order to avoid any future conflicts, and ensure the best quality of life for Mr. Barnes.”

Bucky’s left hand all but crushes his kneecap, trying to slow the bouncing of his leg down, they’re gonna hack into me again…why the fuck did I agree to this? Bucky counts back from ten, like his therapist taught him, and thanks everything holy that the knot in his throat loosens - even if only fractionally. Oh shit, he was gonna throw up.

“Alright well…you have two options, Barnes,” Stark begins, walking over to Bucky, who was trying his damndest not to barf all over the man. “Option one: I can build you a whole new prosthetic, plating and all, from scratch; we can have it surgically upgraded, and I promise you that I’ll be personally involved with one of the best surgeons in the world - Dr. Helen Cho - and make sure your recovery is as fast and easy as possible; I’ll give you a copy of her credentials, too, if that’ll help. You won’t be the only volunteer to be going through the pre and post-surgery hassle, either; everything will be financially covered by Stark Industries, and you’ll have all the support in any way you need it.”

Bucky listens to everything Stark says but still feels his chest seize up, he hadn’t realized he’d been hoping that this whole process would be non-invasive, but now that he was here, with the offer of a free upgrade - even if it meant he went under the knife again - could he really turn it down? Just the thought of post-surgery demands, from physical therapy to healing, made him feel sick and tired but
this was a chance of a life time. He’d be a fool to not jump at the chance. Something in Bucky wanted to believe that the whole thing would be as easy as Stark made it all sound, but through first-hand experience he knew complications could happen that were out of everyone’s control, consequences that he would have to suffer through. Could he really go through it all again?

“Or option two: we can stick with Hammer’s work, and I’ll do my damned best to upgrade anything and everything I can, without having to put you under even once,” Stark finishes, watching Bucky for a moment before adding, “but the choice is entirely yours, Barnes. I know you hate me, and I know I well deserve it and more, but this isn’t about me; this about you and your life, and while I personally root for option one, I’ll do whatever you want me to.”

Bucky was a little caught off guard at that, he knew Stark said there were ‘two options’, but in Bucky’s mind it was either between ‘get the surgery and get the fuck out’ or ‘get the fuck out and don’t get the surgery’ - the same ‘options’ he’d been given all those years ago when he’d approached Hammer Tech. Bucky stares up at Stark from his seat, fists flexing with nerves, but for all he can see on the man’s face, one thing is clear; Stark wasn’t lying, the choice really was Bucky’s to make. And it’d all be paid for, you and Stevie don’t have to worry about anything this time, that was right…Stark was footing the bill, too. After Hammer’s upgrade Bucky and Steve had to scrape together what they could for everything from medical bills to types of therapy, but if what Stark was saying was true, that everything would be paid for and he’d have a support system of people in similar situations then…really, what was there to lose?

“Alright,” Bucky huffs, voice more hoarse than he’d have liked, and nods as he scrubs a hand down his face, “yeah…okay, alright let’s do the surgery.”

“You’re sure about this, Barnes?” Stark asks, and the…damn look in his damn eyes - concern? Doubt? Whatever the hell it was - was far too much for Bucky to handle while his hands were still shaking.

“I said yes, didn’t I?” Barnes snaps, glaring down at his trembling hands, fuck…he could taste the bile tainting the back of his throat.

Stark nods and doesn’t push (thank the damn heavens, because Bucky really would have punched him right then), just at the edge of his peripherals, before moving to sit beside Bucky; legs straddled over the bench so that he fully faces Bucky’s left side, “do you mind?”

The brunet turns to look at Stark for a moment, slight amusement twitching his lips at the fact that the shorter man now asks for permission, as though he hadn’t all but snatched Bucky’s arm up earlier, “whatever.”

There’s a lull of silence between them, and Bucky’s grateful for it, the quiet giving him time to calm down and remember that you won’t be the only one, and Stark Tech is the best in the world, you’ll be okay this time. Bucky still had his doubts, with something this drastic, what sane person wouldn’t? But this was his best shot at a pain-free - or at least, relatively pain-free - life, and if anything, an upgrade meant he at least wouldn’t have a prosthetic that lagged and accidentally punched him in the face when trying to scratch his nose. Bucky breathes deep, eyes drifting shut as he focuses on the silence and…and Stark’s hands on him, through the prosthetic his touches were muted, but the numbed pressure he felt there…it grounded him slightly, to know he wasn’t alone right then.

“So, a musician huh?” Stark begins conversationally after a several minutes of silence, eyes absorbed with looking over Bucky’s prosthetic, “mind taking off your shirt?”

Bucky snorts softly, glancing over at the man on his left, “for you, fine, but I’m not normally this easy.”
Stark looks up at Bucky and, for the first time since entering the man’s workshop, Barnes sees something akin to playful emotion in those whiskey eyes, “then you’re lucky I’m normally a gentlemen who waits until the third date.”

There’s a slight tone of apprehension in Stark’s voice, eyes flicking over Bucky’s face, and for a moment - just a moment - Bucky regrets his earlier outburst, knowing the older man is likely looking for notes of anger or irritation in response to his attempt at banter. So it’s almost as surprising for Bucky as it is for Stark when he replies in the exact opposite of what the engineer might have expected from him. Almost.

“Nah, for a handsome fella like you? Pretty sure I’d put out on the second.”

Sure enough, Bucky’s reply catches the man off guard, and Stark laughs; it’s a full-body thing, contagious in the way it makes Bucky’s own lips curl into a rakish grin, and the musician finds himself drinking in the site. Watching the way the crow’s feet at the corners of Stark’s eyes become more pronounced, the way his eyes seem to dance in amusement, and the child-like way his nose scrunches up - it’s almost adorable. Bucky knows this moment will die off any second now, his petty lizard brain just waiting for Stark to say the wrong thing to strike, but right in that moment…it hits Bucky that, in all of the interviews he’d watched of Stark in the past week, he’d never laughed - not like this - in any of them. The shorter brunet calms after a moment, reaching for a tool as Bucky strips off his Henley, and is suddenly a bit too aware of Stark’s dark eyes watching him.

“Started the band with a few friends from my unit in the army after we got back, it was a way for us to cope and keep busy, though we all still have our day jobs; none of us honestly thought it would pick up, but it’s still just a hobby for us, playing at the odd dive bar and opening act for local bands,” Bucky answers Stark’s earlier question, despite knowing the information is probably readily available for the engineer to find; Bucky found he needed the distraction. Was grateful for it.

Stark grins softly, eyes flickering up to meet Bucky’s for a moment before moving back to his arm, “most works of genius seem like a long shot, until they suddenly aren’t.”

“That’s surprising, coming from a child prodigy,” Bucky says offhandedly, but there’s that edge in his voice again, and if he hadn’t been paying attention he may not have caught the flicker of emotion flash across Stark’s face; but he was, and he did, though it was gone as fast as it came.

Suddenly, Bucky hated the emotionless mask Stark wore so easily.

“So they tell me,” is all Stark says, and the duo fall into a laps of silence that Bucky has to fight not to shift uncomfortably in, you wanted to piss him off not even an hour ago, you wanted him going off on you or hurt at the words you all but punched him with, so what’s changed? Suck it up, Barnes, you wanted him to be responsible for his actions, you ought to be responsible for your own.

“So this campaign,” Bucky starts, honestly just scrambling for any subject change that will lighten the mood; Bucky loathed awkward silences with a passion, and having his shirt off with a stranger wasn’t helping matters, “sounds interesting, what brought it on?”

“Just a moment” Stark notes, no anger or irritation in his tone as he pops open a panel in Bucky’s arm, he just sounded…tired. “Exhausted.” “Well, despite what you thought, I’m not looking for any forgiveness for the shit I’ve done,” for a moment Bucky wants to argue, but Stark presses on, and he bites his tongue.

“I realized I could do more, green energy’s where the future is headed anyway, but there are still hundreds off people who served this country only to get fucked over or left behind,” Stark answers thoughtfully, the words raw with a kind of honesty that genuinely surprises Bucky, chocolate eyes
flick up at him so quickly Bucky might have missed it had he not been staring at the man. “Need to make sure they’re taken care of before my time’s up.”

The last part struck Bucky, the words were - almost inaudibly - mumbled as Stark walked over to his work station to retrieve a few more tools, the words spoken soft enough that Bucky knew they weren’t for him to hear. As Stark returned to look over the latch between his prosthetic and scarred flesh with the new tools, Bucky wanted to press a little more, to know exactly what Stark meant by that last comment. However, before Bucky could properly process the words and comment the engineer moved away, closing the latches at his deltoid, and headed back towards the holographic readings. Bucky stares at Stark’s back, the words twisting something uncomfortable in his gut, he’s probably just going through a mid-life crisis or something. But it wasn’t the words themselves that kept tripping Bucky up, it…it was that tone; Bucky knew that tone all too well, and he felt sick that it was only just registering in his mind, cursing himself for being a hotheaded idiot.

It was too…broken to ignore a tone that Bucky himself had used when the world seemed like too much, days where he and everything around him all just felt like a hopeless pile of shit; a grated sound that would come out of him on mornings when getting out of bed seemed impossible because he couldn’t even find it in himself to open his eyes. A tone of voice that coated Steve’s words when he’d clutch onto Bucky, needing to know his best friend wasn’t laying dead half a word away. It was a resignation Natasha would speak with on nights she couldn’t bare to make eye contact with anyone, let alone allow anyone to touch her. It was a sound Clint would slur together on the days he couldn’t bare to listen to the world, far too scared of hearing deafening explosions and screams. It was a trembling timber Sam would grind out on afternoons when all he could feel was fire against his skin, no matter how tightly he clutched his fists and told himself it wasn’t real.

Bucky knew that tone of voice, and it was never one that held anything good.

Barnes opens his mouth to speak, but once again words fail him because what was he supposed to say, when Stark turns. The lines of the man’s shoulder’s exuded fatigue despite his camera-ready smile, his eyes were as vacant as they had been earlier, and Bucky suddenly wants to scream.

Bucky bites his tongue, instead, and stays quiet.

“I can get a prototype done two weeks from today, that okay with you?”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll…I’ll be here.”

“See you in two weeks, then.”

Bucky pulls his shirt back on and leaves without another word. Barnes, apologize, a part of him protests as he walks back towards the elevator, even if you hate him there’s nothing this guy’s gaining out of this, just be a decent human and at the very least thank him, his conscience reprimands as Bucky enters the elevator, turning and catching a final glimpse of Stark already absorbed in his work, the music from earlier flaring back to life. Buck, you have every right to be pissed and hate that man, he’s the reason you lost your arm, this shit is the least he can do, a voice - that sounds strangely like Steve - continues to argue on behalf of his ire.

Try as he might, as Bucky lies in bed that night, he couldn’t get the look of Stark’s blank gaze out of his mind for the life of him; the man’s voice replays in Bucky’s head, ‘before my time’s up’ is the last thing Bucky hears in the silence of his room, before he drifts off into a fitful sleep.
I hope y'all enjoyed this chapter as much as I did!
A Promise Made

Chapter Summary

Tony makes a promise to himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sir, the thing that’s keeping you alive is also killing you, and your stress is the driving factor of the steadily rising toxicity levels,” Tony sighs, letting JARVIS is words wash over him, tossing the Blood Toxicity Meter back onto his work table after the pixilated letters read out BLOOD TOXICITY 21%.

Tony doesn’t understand why he bothers checking, the numbers have proven they’re only going to steadily go up and not down, but then again maybe he was a masochist - wouldn’t be the most shocking thing in my repertoire of deviances, he thinks with a shaky chuckle. Unlatching the arc reactor, Tony grits his teeth, maybe it was psychosomatic, but he’d swear he could feel the shrapnel digging into his heart each and every time he had to swap out the palladium core. There was always a sense of shame that came with seeing the arc reactor, the thing he’d been cursed with that kept him breathing, the thing that - outside of JARVIS - only Pepper and Stane knew of; the thing that was, as JARVIS had stated, keeping him alive was also killing him, though Tony couldn’t help but find a poetic irony to it.

Things Tony created for good would always ended in death, it seemed.

At least, this time, it was Tony dying and not an innocent caught in the crossfire.

Replacing the chip Tony secures the arc reactor back into his chest, gasping when it comes back online, “fuckin’ hell.”

“Your blood toxicity levels are steadily rising, Sir, and without an alternative or cure I fear-” Tony cuts JARVIS off with a trembling wave, knowing exactly what his long time friend would say, and chuckles mirthlessly.

“There isn’t a cure, J,” he sighs, standing and bypasses Dum-E who holds out his dose of Chlorophyll, deciding missing one dose won’t kill him - yes, he sees the irony. “The best I can do is try to leave a better world behind, so why not tell me how the arrangements for charity gala are coming along?”

Tony wanted to curse himself for the way he knew JARVIS would have likely sighed if he had the capability, though that doesn’t stop the tone of exasperated worry that fills the workshop as the AI answers with what Pepper had done in preparation for the gala, the date - December sixteenth - had been deliberately chosen by Tony when he’s taken over the foundation; sure he lost his parents that day, but why not spend the day trying to better the world instead of wallowing in his loss - or at least, that’s what Young Tony had believed at the time. Old Tony hated Young Tony, with a passion.

JARVIS rambles on about the progress of the ‘models’, the developing prosthetics, and other relevant information Tony pretty much ignores in favor of losing himself in a bottle for the night. The world spins slightly as he sits back down on his workshop’s couch with a his best friend Jack, head tipped
back to rest on the backrest, and finds himself speaking before his mind can catch up with his words.

“That guy, Barnes, play something from his band, would you?”

“Certainly Sir,” JARVIS answers, adding after a moment, “the band is called Howling Commandos.”

The chords of a strumming guitar start to filter into the silence of his workshop, soon followed by a melodic voice and the beat of drums, Tony immediately recognizes the voice as the man he’d spoken to a few days ago; though here it’s slightly deeper, raspier, and it pulls all of Tony’s attention to the words sung. Tony was never one for modern rock, preferring the classics like Smashing Pumpkins and Sabbath, but it would be a blatant lie to say he wasn’t immediately captivated by Barnes’s band - by the Howling Commandos. He taps his foot along to the heavy beat of the drums, losing himself in liquor and the somber lyrics of the rock band, and can’t help but close his eyes to imagine what it would be like to see them live. The words were passionate, that much was painfully clear, and Tony felt his heart twisting as the words resonated within his chest.

To some the lyrics sung would have sounded like a love song, but to Tony they were a painful confession of bravery and loss; flashes of Yinsen’s sacrifice for Tony play across his mind, of Tony’s failures to Pepper and Rhody - his failures to the world. Tony knew no matter how hard he tried, he’d never be able to make up for the damage he’d caused, and the lives lost in his ignorance to Stane’s dealings. He’d read the former soldier’s files, knew it was his weapons that caused the man to lose his arm, that his fault his teammate, Barton, had lost almost more than eighty percent of his hearing - and that was just Barnes’s unit.

The man likely loathed Tony and put up with him for the upgrade to his arm, and Tony couldn’t blame him in the slightest. People were dead because of him, and no matter how much he strode to try to do right, he’d never make up for his wrongs. Tony’s eyes blink open and he’s taken aback by the tears that warm his cheeks, hot against his skin and can’t help the the raspy, broken laugh that passes his lips; the sound was almost muted because of the blaring music, but he still heard it, heard how wrong - how weak - it was.

His father and Obie were right; Tony was weak.

His head lulls back, resting on the back of his couch once more and Tony blinks up at the ceiling, trying to keep from throwing up, and feels a resolve solidifying in his chest; a silent promise to himself that, no matter what, he’d try to make a difference before his death, and this time it would be one for good.

Whatever is out there, if you’re listening, Tony thinks to himself, or maybe he says it out loud, he isn’t sure, please let me live long enough to fulfill this promise…please, I’m begging you, let me do some good in my pathetic excuse of a life.

Bucky slouched on the stool of Clint’s drum set, spinning the drumming stick in between the fingers of his right hand, head bobbing to an all too familiar beat in his head and decides fuck it; tapping out the beats against Mylar, his foot works the kick-drum, and Clint perks up at the instantly familiar rhythm. It only takes a split second for Clint to grin and snatch up his guitar, talented fingers keeping up with the strumming the song demanded, keeping in perfect time with Bucky’s drumming.

“She was a fast machine!” Bucky sings out, voice purposely scratchy and pitched, “she kept her motor clean, she was the best damn woman I had ever seen!”
“She had sightless eyes, telling me no lies, knockin’ me out with those American thighs!” Clint sings along, both friends grinning like goons as they sing in-time with the music, both trying to imitate the legendary Brian Johnson.

The brunet can’t help but laugh as he sings out the next lines, both he and Clint all but butchering AC/DC’s You Shook Me All Night Long, and loving every second of it. Barton could sing fairly well despite his hearing loss, but right then that didn’t matter to either man, both simply playing out the classic with no other intention than having fun. Bucky shook his head wildly, taking advantage of his longer hair and - while knowing he’d probably have a crick in his neck by the end of it all - head-banged carelessly, all the while singing along with his best friend and smiling like a total fool.

“Shook me all night long! Yeah you shook me all night long!” Both men belted, uncaring if the neighbors - or Coulson, who very well might kick down the door if he was feeling up to it - that might hear them from Clint’s basement, missing the next few lines in the midst of their laughter.

Bucky was never more thankful for Clint than right at that moment, the sandy-blond drummer accepted his friend’s nearly sleepless prone form at his door, stepping aside to let him in and lead Bucky down to the basement of his and Nat’s home without a word. Sharing a couple of beers before deciding to work on a couple of songs, Clint knew Bucky would talk to him when he was ready, so unlike Steve, Barton simply let the man distract himself from his problems. What was the problem, you ask? Well, it came in one compact body brimming with snark and genius, otherwise known as Tony Stark.

Bucky couldn’t stop thinking about the man he’d seen eight days prior, and it was driving him so close to the brink of insanity that he was losing sleep over the fucker. His mind a continuous thunderstorm of what he should have said, what he shouldn’t have said, and what he wanted to say. It was maddening, how much Stark was taking over his thoughts, and all the more frustrating to know the man probably hadn’t even spared Bucky a second thought the moment he left his workshop; Bucky was just another project to him, after all. It was halfway through their seamless butchering of Paradise City that Clint’s phone goes off, catching the drummer’s attention, and Bucky raises a brow at the fond grin that immediately stretches over his lips.

Clint flips his friend off as he answers the call, “hello sugarplum.” There’s a beat of silence before ex-sniper barks a laugh and nods, “yes, Coulson…no, you are my sugarplum, just accept it…I’ll head out there now, thanks for reminding me!”

Barton ends the call and glances over to Bucky who - knowing he’s a little shit for doing it, but does it anyway - smirks at his best friend, and wiggles his brows, “you and Coulson huh? When did that happen?”

“A lot can happen in-between jobs,” Clint says with a roll of his eyes, putting away his guitar and searches for his keys, “also, shut up.” The brunet snorts and shakes his head, but truth be told, he was happy for Clint - happier now that the drummer would no longer be pining after their manager like a lovesick puppy.

Bucky watches Clint for a few more moments before speaking up, “where are you headed? A date?”

“I wish,” the man chuckles, snatching up his beer bottle to finish its contents before tossing it into the recycling bin with his usual impressive - but casual - accuracy, “but no, I have an appointment with Stark for my new hearing aids.”

Bucky tenses at the mention of the engineer, stormy eyes now zeroing in on his best friend, “with Stark? It’s nearly six, why so late?”
Clint shrugs, eyes scanning around the room probably for anything else he may need, “apparently it wouldn’t take long, so he booked me in as his last appointment of the day.” The sandy-blond’s eyes move over to his friend, eyes assessing before raising a brow, “wanna come along?”

Perhaps he moves a bit too quickly to stand, but Bucky would never admit to it, “sure, someone’s gotta make sure you don’t make an ass of yourself.”

Clint says nothing for a moment, a sniper’s eye for detail undoubtedly giving the brunet away, but neither men comment before drummer nods and the duo leave the shared house. The drive to Stark Tower’s is a blur to Bucky, one moment they’re pulling out of Clint’s driveway, the next Clint’s pulling his car key’s out of the ignition and stepping out into the visitor’s parking lot. Bucky wants to say he’s more present for it all, but he watches listlessly as his friend speaks to the receptionist who directs them to the private elevator; instead, Bucky’s mind is buzzing with seeing Stark again, everything he had and hadn’t said to the man in their last meeting, the words that had been a deafening thunderstorm in his mind for the past few days falling over themselves as to what his first words to the inventor will be. However, when the elevator doors part, all the words Bucky’s almost brimming with suddenly fall silent. Bucky’s eyes immediately falling onto the woman in Stark’s arms, the pair pressed tightly against one another, and something snares - not painfully, but…it’s not a pleasant feeling, either - within his chest. The duo pull apart after a moment, and the elated smile on Stark’s face was brilliant, almost blindingly bright as he laughed at something the blonde had said to him; nothing like the smiles he’d given Bucky.

“Sir, your final appointment of the day has arrived,” JARVIS announces, Clint and Bucky finally stepping out of the elevator, the chuckling pair looking over to them, “Clinton Francis Barton, here for a consult and fitting for his Stark Aids.”

Stark’s smiles at the duo, eyes stuttering on Bucky - for no longer than a split second, but Bucky caught it - before moving on, and had he not seen the smile the shorter man had on but seconds ago, Bucky wouldn’t have noticed how it dimmed ever so slightly - it doesn’t reach his eyes...not really, anyway. Bucky’s hands ball into fists. Maybe coming was a mistake.

“Tony Stark, nice to meet you, Mr. Barton,” Stark begins, coming forward to take Clint’s hand in his own.

“Lord, you’re about to gift me with hearing, how about we just stick with Clint? ‘Mr. Barton’ makes me feel like you’re talking to my father, and I ain’t that stuffy,” Clint jokes, earning a chuckle from Stark and the woman at his side.

“Well then, Clint, let me introduce-”

“Tony don’t make me smack you, I can introduce myself just fine,” the woman interrupts, her warning holding no real heat and is undercut by her fond grin at the man. “Carol Danvers, Air Force Captain.”

Bucky grins, taking Danvers’ offered hand, “a Flyboy huh? Well you’ve got two former Bullet Sponges on your hands, James Barnes, nice to meet you ma’am.”

The blonde laughs, feigning a cringe as she looks over at Stark, “really Tony? Rhodey told me you were on the Flyboy side, I’m feeling utterly betrayed right now.”

“Oh no, Cheeseburger, I have no beef in this tussle!” Stark chuckles back, hands raised in surrender and takes a playful step back - Bucky doesn’t miss the way he hasn’t looked at him since they’d stepped into his ‘shop. “You children run along with your military jargon, and no hair pulling or sundown gun fights, I still need you morons alive.”
The group laugh for a moment, Clint and Carol talk shop while Stark and Bucky listen, the latter seamlessly stealing glances at the engineer who keeps his gaze on Danvers - much to Bucky’s silent irritation. Barnes doesn’t miss the way Stark grins at Danvers with an openly fond expression, his shoulders relaxed as he chuckles at her quips to Clint, and for the life of him Bucky doesn’t understand why he wants Stark’s attention - or at least wants it away from the woman Stark seems to have the habit of unconsciously leaning towards.

“So, what brings you to Tony?” Bucky cuts in the moment there’s a lull in her conversation with Clint, the blonde doesn’t miss a beat as she raps her knuckles against the thigh of her right leg.

“Tony’s hooking me up with a transfemoral prosthetic, got shot down in Serbia, and unfortunately for me, my leg decided to stay there,” Carol answers with an unbothered tone, grinning at Stark as she adds. “If all goes well, I should be able to kick Robo Cop’s ass pretty soon, right?”

“Oh please, you can kick that pile of scrap metal’s ass any day,” Stark chuckles softly and grins, “hopefully more so with the new leg. I have the prototype ready, but the final version should be ready by next Wednesday, that sound good?”

“I’ll see you Wednesday then, but make sure you get some sleep, okay? This isn’t university anymore, Tones, and all-nighters will catch up with you, you hear me?” Stark groans but nods, relenting to the woman’s words and Danvers grins in triumph, pressing a kiss to his cheek before hugging him - the sight making Bucky’s chest constrict, but what the hell? The engineer chuckles softly, the sound a little off to Bucky’s ears, “when I’m dead, Cheeseburger.” There’s a moment, a fraction of a second where Bucky sees Stark catch his own words, quick to explain. “I’ll sleep when I’m dead, like the saying goes, y’know,” he finishes with a nonchalant wave of his hand, like a joke, the others chuckle, but for some reason...Bucky couldn’t help the sudden sickening churn within his stomach.

“Whatever you say, Martini,” Danvers dismisses with a fond smile and roll of her eyes, what’s with the nicknames?, before looking at Clint and Bucky, “it was nice to meeting you two, even if you are Army.” Carol throws a salute over to the trio, turning to leave when Stark calls out.

“Tell Platypus he owes me lunch!”

The Air Force pilot’s laughter is the echoed throughout the workshop for a moment as the doors close on her, the jovial sound dying out and leaves the trio in a lull of silence moment, Stark claps his hands breaking the quiet.

“Alright Bar- sorry, Clint, let’s get started on your aids,” Clint nods and follows along with Stark, “J, tell me more about our new friend here,” Stark says to his AI, introducing Clint to the autonomous being as he explains the specs behind Clint’s current aids.

Bucky half listens, instead more focused on the way mind scrambles to make sense of what he’s feeling, but all Bucky can think is why does my chest ache?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented last chapter, I hope y'all enjoyed! xxoxoo
Chances

Chapter Summary

Clint sets Bucky straight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Dum-E, no, put that dow- OW! U, you ass!” Stark yelps, hopping on one foot as three bulky machines crowd around him, clutching the foot one of the bots had likely run over. “Butterfingers stop encouraging them!”

Clint and Bucky stare in absolute bewildered amusement, both men unable to hold back their laughter as Stark tells off the two machines as though they were children, it’s an intriguing sight to behold; hands on his narrow hips, face cross yet fond as he tells off the three autonomous robots that all - somehow - sound sad as they beep. Tony Stark, father of three clumsy ‘bots, who knew?

“Allright, if you want to help, Dum-E go get my tools so we can help out Clint; U go make me some coffee, and Butterfingers…how about you keep Barnes company while I talk with Clint?”

All three bots beep happily, wheeling off to start on their tasks, and that’s how Bucky finds himself playing catch - well, more accurately, playing fetch - with a bulky robot that shows just about as much eager excitement - if decidedly less slobber - as Lucky. Bucky’s sat on the couch of Stark’s work shop, eyes flitting from Butterfingers to his friend and Stark, both men situated at the same work station Bucky had been days prior.

“Are they programed to be so clumsy?” Clint chuckles, watching with a mix of amusement and horror, as U makes Stark coffee topped with motor oil and some loose bolts for added flavor.

“No, like JARVIS they’re all AIs, and can be amazingly helpful, but more often than not they act like a bunch of clueless five year olds but don’t ask me why,” Stark chuckles, taking the mug of poison from U and patting is claw as the bot beeps happily at being helpful. “I’ve been asking myself that question since I built Dum-E at sixteen, U and Butterfingers came along later, but they’re both just as clueless; their older brother is a horrible influence,” even as he says it, it’s explicitly fond, Dum-E beeps happily and spins around in place.

“I think I read about that, pretty impressive,” Clint says, petting U when he rolls over to get the drummer’s attention, the engineer waving away the praise.

“Anyway, back to business; so this is technically the final version,” Stark starts instead, holding out a small object the size of the thumbnail, “but I wanted you to try it out before sending you home with it, incase there were any tweaks we needed to make first.”

“Sounds good,” Clint says, moving to take out his current standard bulky hearing aids before Stark can finish speaking, and sets them on the ‘shop’s tabletop.

However, as Clint reaches for the Stark Aids, the brunet gently wraps a hand around his wrists, before pulling away to- to fucking sign at Clint. Of course he knows sign, why wouldn’t he? Bucky
thinks, a mix of appreciation and irritation warring in his chest - and he genuinely doesn’t understand why he feels the latter at all.

**Moron let me finish,** Stark signs pointedly, but the jerky motions are undercut by his grin, **these hearing aids are most likely stronger than the ones you’re used to, so take it slow, okay? Take them out for any reason if you need to, got it?**

Clint looks as taken aback as Bucky feels, but recovers faster than the singer and smiles, signing back, **sir yes sir,** adding a salute for effect.

The drummer takes the hearing aids from Stark and gingerly sets them in his ears, pausing for a moment before speaking, “okay, so they-” he stops, Bucky watches intently as Clint’s eyes slowly widen, “holy shit-sticks!”

And there it is, that brilliant smile that all but takes over Stark’s face, and warms Bucky’s chest to see, “yeah?” He asks softly, smiling wider when Clint nods frantically, “alright we should do a few tests to see how they hold up, only time can really tell how you fair with them, but unlike the ones you currently have there won’t be an issue with feedback or moister buildup. I’ll check in with you in about a week’s time, and fix anything that needs fixing, but I doubt there’ll be any issues.

“We should have you properly set up way before the gala, and I’ll saddle you with a few extras just in case, since I know how shit gets lost. But incase you do end up losing all the extras, just flash your ID to the receptionist and they’ll hand over some more,” Stark explains, slightly distracted, pulling up some information own his holographic display.

“Is this your way of breaking up with me, Tony?” Clint jokes, grinning at the man, “why don’t I just come to you?”

“Well you’ll still need help when I’m-” Stark’s words immediately cut off, his jaw working as his throat bobs, eyes flicking to Clint before looking back at the display. “Don’t be silly, Barton, you totally have a special place in my heart; I was just giving you a heads up incase I have to fly out somewhere and need new aids while I was out of reach. Anyway, I need you to do these tests, it’s a way for me to calibrate them so they’re custom to you, and sign some things for the legal aspect before I can officially call these hearing aids yours and send you home with them.”

Stark guides Clint to another part of the work shop and pulls up a holographic page titled **Hearing Test: Clinton Francis Barton,** and Bucky chuckles slightly at the way Clint’s nose wrinkles at the site of his full name - he never liked being called ‘Clinton’. Once the drummer was set up, Stark watches him for a moment before turning on his heels, steps slowing when he catches Bucky’s gaze, something flashing across his eyes before he makes his way towards the singer.

“Since I have you here, I thought we could work a little more on the specs for your arm,” the tilt at the end of Stark’s words left the option up to Bucky, who nodded.

“Sure, may as well,” he shrugs, moving to stand.

“Well alright, since I only saw you a few days ago there’s still a ways to go, but I wanted to ask you a few more questions and see if there were any customizations you wanted before I finished it up.”

Bucky’s brows crease, “customizations?”

Stark chuckles softly, the sound more tired than amused, and - once again - the feeling in Bucky’s chest tightens, “yeah, trust me this will be nothing like that piece of crap Hammer saddled you with.”
The words leave him before he can stop them, “at least Hammer had prosthetics for vets.”

Across the ‘shop Clint’s head whips around towards the duo, his glare heavy and fixed on his friend, voice scathing, “Bucky-”

“No, he’s right,” Stark cuts the drummer off, right hand coming up to his chest - a tick of his, Bucky realizes, “it was shit of me to not have started this program sooner.” His words surprise both Clint and Bucky, who looks slightly taken aback at the acceptance of the scathing words rather than trying to refute them. “I have the specs of your arm,” Stark starts, leaning back against the table with crossed arms and ankles, “but I don’t know the extent of feeling it allows you, which is on me, I should have asked last time.”

Bucky swallows, willing back the need to smack himself for the way he’d jumped down Stark’s throat, he was hardly looking at Bucky, who cursing himself for the resigned way the man now held himself - the way his arms were folded over his chest far too much like he was trying to hold himself together. He’d been berating himself about the things he’d said - the things he hadn’t said - and this is what he chose to say given a second chance? Jesus, slap a muzzle on him before he gives Stark enough reason to throw him out of the tower on his ear, if he doesn’t jump out a window first.

“Well…I mean I feel, but it’s kind of, muted I guess, like...when your arm is asleep and everything you touch is kind of numb? Dull, in a way...sorry, that’s the best I can describe it. I don’t feel temperatures or textures, just certain levels of pressure, enough for me to know I’m holding something, which was a bitch at first because I was basically crushing everything I touched,” Bucky rambles in explanation, adding the last part in hopes to make Stark laugh - to look at him - and isn’t that a thought?

Stark shakes his head, a small smile ghosting his lips, reassuring, “no, that’s great, because the sensors I’ve been working on - if they work properly, which, I mean, I made them so they will - should allow your left arm to feel like your right arm does, or at least as close to it as possible-”

“It hurts him,” Clint interrupts from his seat, eyes never leaving the screen of the hologram before him, and Bucky whips his head towards his best friend with a glare, but Clint doesn’t look at him. “He said the prosthetic hurts him, maybe because of poor tech or the weight, but it hurts him.”

Bucky turns back to see a thoughtful expression on Stark’s face, and can’t help but catch the undercurrent of regret there as well, he nods and turns his attention back to Bucky, “that’s good to know, and hopefully this won’t be the case with the new prosthetic, I’ve used strong but light materials. For now, I’d like to run a few tests to see the calibration of the arm you have right now so we can compare them later with the new arm, that okay?”

Bucky nods and Stark mimics the gesture with a note of relief in his shoulders, “okay, since you’ll both be doing some further testings, we may finish a bit later than planned, so how about I order some grub, pizza sound good?”

“Yes!” Clint belts from his seat, grinning like a complete loon, “I heard ‘pizza’! Yes to anything with pizza!”

Stark chuckles, looking at Clint from over his shoulder, “Clint I swear one of these days you’re gonna regret being that vague.”

The sand-blond barks a laugh, “thirty years and no regrets yet, Stark!”

The brunet shakes his head, laughing softly, and Bucky drinks in the sight of it, “alright, I’ll set you up and order the food, any special requests?”
“That you keep smiling,” Bucky thinks before catching himself, and says, “something with lots of toppings, otherwise Clint will bitch at us.”

“That’s gotta be it,” he grins, and Bucky accepts that he’ll take what he can get. “JARV pull up the calibration tests for Barnes, and put in an order for three pizzas with all the goodies.”

“Right away, Sir,” answers the AI, a hologram popping up in front of Bucky seconds later, titled Arm Calibration Test: James Buchanan Barnes and with a flex of his left prosthetic Bucky starts the tests.

Stark watches him work for a moment before turning back to his work station, Bucky watches the man from the corner of his eye as he pulls up the specs for a prosthetic leg - likely for Danvers - and tapping away configuring a series of numbers and symbols, all of which fly right over Bucky’s head. Every so often Stark will mutter something to himself, hands moving with quick and efficient movements, the pale blue tinting his tan skin, and Bucky knows his ogling is probably fucking with the test’s results but he can’t bring himself to care - watching Stark work is…hypnotizing, almost. And suddenly Bucky finds himself right where he started, two sides of him fighting over his feelings towards the genius; anger and a strange fascination. It makes no sense, but then again when has his muddled brain ever made sense since coming back? Before he realizes it, Bucky finished the calibration test, a series of results that mean nothing to him appearing before the vet, who simply glances over at it before looking back towards Stark who- Bucky stands before he registers the movement, and nearly sprints to the engineer who suddenly looks pale as death.

“Stark, you okay?”

Dark eyes snap up to meet Bucky’s gaze as though he’d forgotten he was even in the ‘shop, doe eyes and pin-prick pupils gaze up at him but seem…glazed over, and Bucky feels sick at how gaunt Stark looks in comparison to minutes ago - was it minutes? How long had he been doing the test for? Was Stark on something? He was shaky, a sheen sheet of sweat coating his forehead, but there was just something…off about it; Bucky had seen druggies in his life, hell, he and Stevie grew up around them but this…this felt different.

“What?” Stark wheezes out, stepping away from Bucky, his hand twitching with the need to reach out and steady the man, “y-yeah…sorry I just- excuse me.”

Bucky watches in silent confusion as Stark rushes away, battering past a door further in his workshop and slams it shut behind him, Barnes almost jumps out of his skin when Clint speaks from behind him.

“What was that?”

Whipping around, Bucky stares at his friend, “I don’t know, he just suddenly looked-”

“No, I mean earlier,” Clint cuts him off, voice a harsh whisper, eyes hard, “why were you being such a dick to the guy?”

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me, Barnes, Tony is trying to help us and you jump down his throat about it, so again; what. The. Fuck?”

Bucky feels his hackles rise, the side of him still simmering with anger now at the forefront, “was I wrong? Stark built those weapons, and those weapons, may I remind you, are the reason I lost my arm and you almost went completely deaf! How are you not pissed-”
“Because it wasn’t his fault!” Clint yells, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tries to calm himself, and continues at a lower voice. “Yes he built those weapons, yes they’ve fucked up our lives and I even hated the guy for a while, but he also built them for our side; you read the news coverage, Stane was dealing under the table behind Tony’s back, and what did Tony do when he found out? He shut down the weapons manufacturing, when he could have easily continued. His company nearly went under but he stuck with his guns, so to speak, and came out on the other side wanting to help. No one is forcing his hand right now, no one is making Stark start this prosthetic line or go into green energy, sure he fucked up but he’s trying, you of all people should understand and appreciate that.”

Bucky is taken aback by his friend’s passion, his sudden protectiveness of a man he’d just met, “I-”

“Thanks to Stark, I now have hearing aids that don’t make my head ring, that woman, Carol, is about to have her leg back, and he’s working on your arm; he’s trying to do right, Barnes. No man that isn’t remorseful of the shit he’d caused would go through all this trouble just to make a buck, so whatever you have against him don’t drag me into it,” the click of a door sounds behind them, effectively ending their conversation, but Clint takes step forward and whispers, “give him a chance, Buck.”

Bucky swallows thickly as Clint steps away, a grin spreading across his face as though the conversation between them hadn’t just happened, and makes his way over to Stark, slinging an arm around the man’s shoulders before prattling on about something. Stark smiles a little tiredly at Clint, but doesn’t brush him away, and even smiles at Bucky - so he hadn’t heard the conversation, then. Good.

“Sir, your food has arrived, shall I have them deliver it to the workshop?” JARVIS announces, Clint and Bucky look up towards the ceiling, but Stark shakes his head.

“Nah, ask ‘em to take to the penthouse, better than eating around the smell of heated metal,” he answers, walking with Clint towards the private elevator, Bucky trailing after the chatting duo with his friend’s words still ringing inside his head - the damnedest part of it all? Bucky wanted to give Stark a chance.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all you lovely readers and commenters! I hope y’all enjoyed!! xoxoo
Hear the Ticking (Time's Up)

Chapter Summary

The other shoe drops.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Please heed the tags in this chapter! There's mentions of past abuse physical/emotional/psychological, dub-con, and violence! If you choose to proceed, I hope you enjoy!

For those that would like to proceed, but want to avoid the possibly triggering aspects, I'd say your best bet would be to skip starting from "We ended this, before I even..." and picking back up at "Never again."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint all but chokes on his pizza as he laughs, Barnes clearly fighting not to do the same, and Tony can’t help but enjoy the sight and sounds of it all - Barnes hardly ever ever smiled around him, let alone laughed.

“Y-You’re kidding me?!” Clint chokes out, coughing into his fist.

“Nope,” Tony chuckles, taking a swig of his beer, “thankfully TMZ showed up after we managed to get the Poodle out of there, but it was a lost cause with the Zebra, I’m pretty sure there’s video evidence of that on YouTube somewhere.”

“That’s it, it’s official we are totally going to Vegas with you, it’s a done deal Stark, no ifs, ands, or buts!”

Bucky snorts, “weren’t you just listening? Clearly there had been many butts,” the three burst into a renewed fit of laughter, Tony clutching at his side as they giggled like children.

The trio fell back into the conversation, Tony regaling them with stories of his adventures - well misadventures as Rhodey would call them - from his time in MIT, allowing himself to bask in the warmth that Tony felt with the duo. It had been tense, he wouldn’t lie, earlier in the workshop between him and Barnes, but he relished in the easy flow of companionship that now flowed between them - maybe it was the beer, or Clint’s presence, but either way he was grateful for it. Tony had come close to a panic attack earlier when the core had needed to be changed, Barnes far too close for comfort as his body began refusing the decaying chip in his chest, but the look in his stormy eyes - the worry - had been the most startling.

He’d wanted to reach for Barnes, right then, wanted bury his face in the expanse of the man’s undoubtedly warm chest and fight off the panic that welled up within his own, but instead Tony had to pull himself away knowing such an action would have warranted a punch to the face - honestly, he’d been surprised Barnes had yet to do so, given their sordid history. Tony knew he’d deserve it,
and far more, if he was being honest with himself. However, when he’d come back into the ‘shop, fresh chip doing its job within his reactor, Barnes seemed far more… friendly. It had been unsteadying, at first, the sudden juxtaposition in his demeanor as he talked to Tony without the undercurrent of a glare in his gaze or bite to his words, but Tony wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth and instead choose to go along with it.

“Lord that reminds me of this one time Stevie and I pissed off our neighbor’s Mastiff as kids,” Barnes laughs, recounting a tale from his own childhood and Tony listened, enraptured by the natural story teller the man clearly was.

Tony reached for another slice of pizza, the three boxes nearly emptied along with several beer bottles, all strewn across his coffee table; the trio sat like children on the floor of his living room, and for the first time in months Tony felt… content. The genius was sat in between Clint and Barnes, the brunet to his left and Tony could almost feel the warmth that seemed to radiate off of the man, laughing along with him at stories of his own mischievous youth. Tony couldn’t help the way he leaned in ever so slightly towards Barnes; he was magnetic. It had been months since Tony felt this… relaxed, between Rhodey shipping out and his palladium poisoning, Tony had been nothing but a stressed out hot mess, but for the first time he no longer felt the constant ache in between his shoulder blades.

It was a genuine - but welcome - surprise when Barnes threw his arm around Tony’s shoulders as he laughed at something Clint had said, the warm and heavy length of his right arm a pleasant weight across Tony’s shoulders, and the genius couldn’t stop himself from leaning into the man’s side. Tony knew it was just Barnes being friendly, and did his best repress the shiver that threatened to tremble up his spine, but Tony managed, and instead relished in the feeling - when was the last time he’d been this close to someone? However, despite enjoying his time with Clint and Barnes, he could almost hear the ticking of a clock in his mind, waiting with bated breath for it to ring and for the other shoe to drop - with Tony, good things never lasted long. When it finally came, Tony wanted to cry, because it was almost ironic that there had been a literal ringing - well, dinging- that announced the end of his short-lived happiness.

“You expecting someone, Stark?” Barnes asks, confused, arm falling away from Tony - it was almost unsettling how much he missed it.

“No?” Tony shifts, about to stand, when his legs suddenly fail him.

The elevator announced its arrival to Tony’s penthouse, doors parting and he couldn’t help it, his breath catches in his throat at the sight of the other damn shoe dropping like an anvil on his head in the form of one Tiberius Stone.

Tony felt his body tense all over, ice water running through his veins as his face loses the smile it had held just seconds ago. “Ty?”

He could feel Barnes and Clint’s gazes on him, but Tony had a harder time trying to keep his hands from shaking, and jumped to his feet to put himself in between Tiberius and his friends (were they his friends?); how the hell-

“Anthony!” The large man exclaims, his baritone voice brimming with elation, waltzing into Tony’s home as though he’d never left. “How are you, pet?”

The word ‘pet’ alone made Tony’s stomach drop out from under him, the once comforting endearment now just a constant reminder of how Ty viewed him; how had he been so blatantly blind? Don’t kid yourself, you were always blind to what was right in front of you, Tony.
“JARVIS how the fuck-”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but you never locked Mr. Stone out of the building,” JARVIS answers before Tony can even finish his question, and if Tony hears the ire in his AI’s voice, he knows it’s well deserved.

“Who are your friends, Anthony?”

Tony looks back at Barnes and Clint, who were now stood behind the man, the former soldiers likely having read the lines of tension in Tony’s body, because no more were their easy smiles and relaxed postures, instead both held blank expressions Tony cursed himself for causing. Just once, couldn’t he be allowed something good? It seemed, ever since he’d returned, fate was determined to finally dole out his backlog of karma. However, before Tony could answer, or even demand to know what the hell Tiberius was doing in his home, Bucky steps forward.

“James Barnes,” he takes Tiberius’s hand in his metal one, and Tony only just manages to stifle a grin at the wince the large blond fails to hide at Bucky’s grasp. “My friend’s Clint Barton, and you are?”

“Tiberius Stone,” Ty answers nonchalantly, smug, dark eyes looking over Bucky with something that unsettles Tony.

“What are you doing here, Tiberius?” The engineer finally demands, and forces himself not to flinch when a flash of familiar darkness crosses over Tiberius is eyes, gone just as fast as it had appeared - Ty was always good at that, hiding his anger from everyone…everyone but Tony, anyway.

“I think it’s time we talked, in private,” he pointedly answers, eyes moving to look over Barnes and Clint once more, then back to Tony a moment later, “don’t you think, pet?”

“Tiberius I said everything I needed-” Tony stops himself, what is he doing? He’s making a scene in front of Barnes and Clint, Tony’s lingering sense warns, and despite feeling his throat seize at the prospect of being alone with Ty, he knew it was right. The duo behind Tony look torn between confusion and indignation, both of them looking to Tony for some sort of explanation at the sudden situation.

“Who the hell’s that asshole?” Barnes all but growls, the heat of his glare enough to make Tony flinch, even if he suspects the anger isn’t directed at him - this time.

Ty shows his face once and I’m already a spazzing mess, great. Just fucking perfect, Tony thinks with a sigh, running a hand down his face.

“Please.”

Ty’s lips twitch in victory, before the man turns to give Tony a moment with his guests, the brunet waits until he hears the click of his office’s door closing before turning. Get them out of here, Tony, they aren’t apart of this, Tony’s lingering sense warns, and despite feeling his throat seize at the prospect of being alone with Ty, he knew it was right. The duo behind Tony look torn between confusion and indignation, both of them looking to Tony for some sort of explanation at the sudden situation.

“Who the hell’s that asshole?” Barnes all but growls, the heat of his glare enough to make Tony flinch, even if he suspects the anger isn’t directed at him - this time.

Ty shows his face once and I’m already a spazzing mess, great. Just fucking perfect, Tony thinks with a sigh, running a hand down his face.

“It’s nothing, really,” Tony lies, herding Clint and Barnes towards the elevator, needing them to leave before Tiberius changes his mind and decides to make a scene - he didn’t want to taint this, no more than it’s already been, and he knew Ty would pull something like that if Tony took too long.

“Tony-” Clint starts, throwing the inventor a strange look he can’t decipher over his shoulder.
“I’m sorry about the extra hearing aids, I promise I’ll get them to you as soon as I can, okay? I’m really sorry guys, but you have to go,” Tony knows his tone doesn’t sound as nonchalant as he wants it to, knows he’s likely just confusing the two men further, but he has no other choice. All but shoving Barnes and Clint into the elevator Tony instructs JARVIS to take them directly to the parking where Clint’s car is, ignoring their protests, but stills when a hand clamps down on his forearm.

“Tony, are you okay?” Tony stares into Barnes is eyes, the swirl of emotion in them almost makes Tony dizzy, and for the first time Tony doesn’t know what to say; this was the first time Barnes said his actual name.

He stills, for a moment.

The reality was that Tony wanted Barnes and Clint to stay, wanted that protective barrier between him and Tiberius, but knew that was asking far too much from men that hardly knew him - from men he’d harmed. He had no right to ask them for help. No right to ask anyone for help. He could do this on his own, like he always had. No one would believe him, anyway, so why make things any worse? Tony smiles, sharp enough to cut glass, and lies with an ability that would put any trickster God to shame - like he always does.

“Tiberius is an old friend, nothing to worry about, I’ll be fine.” Barnes releases Tony’s arm when he tugs away slightly, stepping back form the elevator, “thanks for having dinner with me, it was fun.”

That last part catches Tony off gaurd, because he hadn’t meant to say it, even if it was the truth. Tony watches Barnes is eyes flick behind Tony at the last second, but before the brunet can utter a word the elevator doors close, and for a moment Tony wonders what he might have said - finding himself wanting to know, but lets it go, now wasn’t the time. Tony stands there for a moment, silently staring at the sleek steel of the doors, and wishes he’d asked them to stay.

“Sir?”

Why won’t my hands stop shaking?

“Sir!”

“What JARVIS?!” Tony snaps, he didn’t mean to, but…but- fuck why won’t his hands stop shaking?!

“Sir, Mr. Stone is in your workshop.”

“…what?”

“Mr. Stone is in your workshop, he’d used the private staircase in your office to head down to it, I attempted to stop him but he used the override code you’d given him and-”

Tony is off like a shot, NO! screaming in his head over and over again, he’s surprised he doesn’t break his neck going down the stairs. Tony isn’t even mad at JARVIS, it was his fault, why had he never changed the override codes? He’d given it so freely to Tiberius all those years ago, and despite everything he never changed them, why didn’t he fucking change them? What had he been thinking? That Ty would apologize for everything he’d done and come back to him? Is that what he had wanted? Tony felt sick with himself, he was such a damn screw up and now Tiberius was in his private workshop and…and- oh God I’m gonna pass out. Tony only just manages to keep himself from slamming into the door to his workshop, instead his shoulder slams into the concrete wall, beating a first against he surface he forces himself to breathe. His breathes come out whiney and
high pitched, drying his lips, mouth and throat; his chest is moving too fast, he can’t do this...he cannot do this- Tony, you have to do this; leave one good thing behind, remember? Your ‘one good thing’ is in there, so what are you gonna do about it, Stark?

Tony screws his eyes shut and clenches he jaw, he can’t do this...but he has to anyway; with one final pound of his fist against the wall Tony takes a deep breath before bursting into his workshop, “what the hell, Ty?! JARVIS shut down all monitors NOW!”

“Prosthetics? Really Tony?” Tiberius scoffs as the screens go black or disappear altogether, “this is what you’ve been wasting your time on since you’ve been back? Pathetic.”

Tony internally congratulates himself for not flinching at the all too familiar word, but refuses to break Ty’s gaze when the man turns to look at him - looks at Tony like he’s...like I’m nothing, “what are you doing here, Tiberius?”

Stone rolls his eyes and saunters forward like he owns the place, and Tesla help him Tony tried to stand his ground, but when Tiberius reached a hand out the backward step and flinch just happened. Ty just chuckles at Tony, like the man’s being ridiculous - ‘you’re overreacting’, he always said - and clutches at the front of Tony’s tee before yanking him forward, the engineer stumbles before slamming into Stone’s broad chest - Tony’s hands fly up between them, managing to keep the arc reactor from pressing into Ty’s polo, small mercies, Tony supposes.

The genius looks up into his former lover’s eyes, and he sees it, sees the warmth and in them that had always made Tony feel less alone - made him feel like someone cared. It’s also because he sees it, that he feels so fucking sick; it was never real with Ty, was it? It feels worse than any blow Tiberius had ever thrown at him, Tony, you knew it wasn’t, but you clung to him anyway. Why? Why did he stay with this man for so long- because he said he loved you, and...and fuck that hurt.

The man huffs a hot breath against Tony’s neck, his pointed nose pressed against the tendon there, “what do you think I’m doing here, pet?”

*Just breathe, you ended this before Tony,* the brunet reminds himself, *you can do it again.*

“Tiberius,” Tony starts, his mouth suddenly dry, tongue tacky in his mouth as he tries to wet his lips, “what are you doing here?”

How had he done this before? Oh right, the hussy Ty was fucking in Tony’s bed had still been there, and Ty was never one to cause a scene in front of others.

“We ended this, before I even left for Afghanistan, Ty. We-” Tony’s words die on his tongue when Tiberius walks him backward, just a few steps, before he shoves the engineer.

Tony stumbles back and slams into the wall, head and shoulders cracking against unforgiving surface with the force of it, and chokes on a gasp - *what’s with me and walls today?* His breathing stutters but eventually comes back, while Tony tries forcing his vision to *stop spinning damnit,* only for Ty to crowd his space. Tony isn’t so proud that he’d deny feeling fear coursing through him at the dark look in Ty’s eyes, he’d learned years ago to never underestimate the man, and not for the first time - not for the first time in the last few minutes, even - Tony regrets sending Clint and Barnes away.

“No, Anthony, you said we were over,” Tiberius grips Tony’s jaw, forcing the shorter man to meet his eyes, nails digging into his cheeks that press against teeth and gums. “I never agreed.”

“Ty, please-” Tony hates himself for the way his voice comes out breathy and trembling, loathes himself for the way his body tenses, only to melt into the hot press of Ty’s lips against his own - his
Ty’s kisses were always hard and demanding. Dizzying. Lustful. *Emotionless.* A battle that needed to be own, not a passion shared. Tiberius always knew Tony’s weaknesses, ever since they’d met not even a year after his parents’ deaths; Ty has been Tony’s one constant. He knew where to push and pull to get the engineer begging for more, knew what to say and do to make Tony smile or cry, and for a moment - just a *moment* - Tony considers just *giving in.* It would be so much *easier,* to just give in to this bit of warmth, to let Ty hold him down and make him forget - even if only for a few hours. However, one thing holds Tony back, and he wants to say it’s his sanity, or his self-respect; wants to claim it’s his reason convincing him that Ty will only hurt Tony, that he’ll leave him as cold and broken as he has been for months, like he always does - and Tony knows that, knows it all for a *fact,* but he’s just so…so goddamn *lonely.*

So no, the only thing that *does* hold him back when Ty ruts himself against Tony, hand gripping at the skin of his waist is something far, *far* more simple; *he’ll see the arc reactor.*

Ty couldn’t get his hands on the technology.

Tony wouldn’t allow it.

With a trembling resolve Tony presses his hands against Ty’s chest, shoving the larger man away, Tiberius only stumbles back a single step and breathes hard - his eyes harder, darker. Tiberius doesn’t hesitate - he never hesitated - and Tony knows what’s coming before he feels the fist connect with his jaw, throwing him to the side. The shorter man scrambles for purchase and catches himself before falling to the floor, his ears ring, but he wills himself to glare back at Ty and doesn’t allow himself to back down. *Don’t give in, not now…not again.*

*Never* again.

“Get out, Tiberius,” Tony rasps out, hating himself for the way his body all but *screams* for warm touches, for intimacy - even if it never lasted with Ty, not long, anyway. “Get the *fuck* out before I call the damn cops,” he spits, pennies tainting his taste buds. He bit his tongue, *fuck* that stings.

“You’ll ask me back, *pet,*” Tiberius chuckles, taunting, “you always do.”

The man glares at Tony for a moment longer, JARVIS - thankfully - rips the elevator doors across the workshop open, in silent agreement with his creator; Tony says nothing when Tiberius sneers at him and speaks over his shoulder.

“You’ll regret this, Anthony,” Ty growls, Tony looks to the back of Tiberius’s head, the man turning to send him once last glare before stepping into the carriage. “I *promise* you, you’ll regret this,” the doors slide close, faster than normal, Tony knows it’s JARVIS’s doing and he’s thankful.

“Like hell I will,” Tony whispers to his empty workshop, hands trembling at his sides before reaching up to place them over his arc reactor, *it’s safe,* body brimming with anger and humiliation. “JARVIS, lock him out change and change *all* override codes, and call the cops if he so much as *steps foot* in the tower again, got it?”

“Consider it done, Sir.”

The drive back to Bucky’s apartment from Stark Tower is tense, neither man speaking as Clint drives a little faster than normal, movements jerky as he turned towards his friend’s home and Bucky
understands; he feels anger and worry coating his molars with an acrid taste the entire way home. Bucky’s mind doesn’t settle as he lays in bed, staring up at the ceiling of his darkened bedroom, and couldn’t get the look of Stark’s face out of his head. Despite his earlier fuck ups, Bucky took Clint’s words to heart and made an effort to give Stark a chance, those efforts were immediately repaid - tenfold - with each bodily laugh and casual touch from Stark; he was tactile, like Bucky, but had been holding himself back because he probably thought you would have decked him if he so much as looked at you for too long. Yeah…yeah Bucky regrets the way he acted, now more than ever. Bucky couldn’t deny the way his skin all but set aflame each time the smaller man’s skin brushed his own, the way his heart pounded that much harder every time he smiled at Bucky, and he’d found himself wanting to spend the entire night sharing silly stories over pizza and beers with the man.

Bucky thought of how right Stark had felt against him; he’d been apprehensive of the action at first, but Bucky’s only real regret once he’d wrapped his arm around Tony’s shoulders was that he hadn’t done it sooner. He didn’t know what it was about Stark - no, about Tony - that drew him in, but Bucky was hooked. However, the casual relaxation, the elation - the false sense of security - was undercut by the appearance of Tiberius Stone. The change in atmosphere was instant, and the loss of seeing Tony’s smile was almost a tangible thing to Bucky; one second they’d been having genuine fun, and the next the engineer was all but kicking them out of his penthouse.

The look that took over Tony’s face - indignation and fucking fear - the second he laid eyes on the man made Bucky’s stomach drop out from under him and brought his defenses up; he didn’t even know the man - nor the reason - for Tony’s immediate change in mood, but Bucky had to hold himself back from yanking Tony into his chest right before throw Tiberius out the damn window. Clint would have probably helped me do it, the way he looked at the Stone guy, Bucky thinks with a tired chuckle. He’d never seen Tony look that way, even when he’d been the one to crowd, yell and accuse him, Tony just took it; there hadn’t been fear but resignation, and the reminder that Bucky had caused that now made him feel sick to his stomach.

‘How are you, pet?’ the bastard had called Tony pet! What the hell was that about?

“Fuck this,” Bucky grunts, pushing himself up from his bed and throws off the bed covers, marching into his living room he snatches his laptop from its spot on the beaten up couch.

Flipping the screen up Bucky opens top the search engine and types in Tiberius Stone + Tony Stark and immediately his browser fills with gossip rag articles, each title screaming for his attention: ‘TONY STARK AND TY STONE SEEN SKINNY DIPPING’, ‘BILLIONAIRE ANTHONY STARK AND TIBERIUS STONE SHARE A HOT AND HEAVY KISS OUTSIDE NIGHT CLUB’, ‘BREAKING: TONY STARK AND TY STONE DATING?! FIND OUT MORE!’. Each headline made the twisting in Bucky’s gut more and more unbearable, until he finally slams his laptop shut, uncaring if he’d broken the damn thing as he tosses it onto his coffee table; so they’re dating? Tony never mentioned him, even in his post-abduction interviews, but what about him and Danvers then? He seemed pissed, upset, when Tiberius showed up, not happy, Bucky’s mind supplies, and it was true, Tony seemed just as ready to toss the man out as Bucky had been upon seeing the genius is reaction. However, that then left the question of why? Why the hell did he kick him and Clint out instead of Tiberius? Why did he seem so damn scared? Why- why didn’t you fight harder to stay, Barnes? Bucky snatches up his phone and types out a message to a number he never thought he’d use before he even realizes it, the shwoop! of the message sending out catching him by surprise when his actions finally register.

You - Today, 1:32AM: Tony are you okay?

It’d be a blatant lie to say Bucky got any sleep that night, or that Tony’s frantic honey eyes didn’t
flash across his mind every time he closed his own; it would be a outright lie to claim that Bucky didn’t snatch up his phone every time it lit up and buzzed, his heart in his throat hoping it was Tony replying each time.

Chapter End Notes

Ty is an asshole, yeah? Yeah. I hope y'all enjoyed this chapter, and thank you again to every one who commented previously! xxoxoo
Admitting You Have It Bad

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony finally meet, and Bucky has some self-revelations.

Chapter Notes

Some smut!

Stark never replies.

The radio silence was driving Bucky crazy, slowly, but surely.

Bucky fought the urge to drive over and make sure the man was okay.

He’d be seeing Tony tomorrow; he could wait one more night…damn it he could.

That didn’t stop Bucky from secretly keeping tabs on news outlets, though, going so far as to set up a notification system for Tony - and that asshole Stone - is name on his phone; his stomach dropping every time he did get a notification, but the relief was instant each time it wasn’t a police report - or worse. Turns out Tony Stark had an active - and seemingly growing - fanbase, who knew?

He was overreacting, he was sure of it.

“Bucky you need to loosen up!” Sam calls to the brunette over the club’s thumping music, “it’s Saturday night and you look like a kicked puppy, put down the damn phone and have some fun!”

Bucky groans, Sam was right, he needed to blow off some steam before he did something he’d regret, like actually driving over to Stark’s house. He and Clint didn’t talk about the incident at Tony’s place, and despite his own conflicting feelings about the situation, the brunette had ultimately been grateful - Bucky really didn’t think he could stomach imagining that leaving had been the wrong choice. Reaching forward Bucky snatches up one of the shots Natasha had ordered for the table, shivering as he feels the smooth burn of Stoli run down his throat Bucky moves to stand, holding out his phone for Sam to take and his friend does - with a laugh and teasing cheer of luck, of course.

Bucky moved towards the dance floor, emerging himself in the throng of bodies, giving into the music that thumped though his alcohol addled mind and warmed skin. He swayed to the beats, for the first time in fucking days Bucky stopped thinking, and felt blissfully free for it. The dance floor was crowded with bodies, shoulders bumping and hips grinding; there wasn’t a single touch on his body the brunette didn’t enjoy. His skin was buzzing. There was a woman at his front, lush bottom grinding against his lap and had no qualms when Bucky’s hands wandered along her flanks, instead she leaned back against him; her head tilts to one side, blonde hair falling away to expose soft skin, inviting. Bucky’s attention had been focused on the woman in front of him, so it was a bit of a surprise when he felt strong hands grip his own hips.
The man was slightly shorter than Bucky, body firm, and the brunet didn’t mind surrendering control whatsoever. The man behind him was unashamed in his touches, downright filthy in his caresses, and Bucky felt himself slowly losing his mind. Images of calloused hands and lithe arms danced behind his eyelids; flashes of whiskey eyes and lush-lipped grins, adorable crow’s feet, and for a moment Bucky almost forgets how to breathe. The brief images were enough for Bucky to know exactly who he was thinking of, to know who’s touches his body craved, and for the first time Bucky finally admits it to himself; admitted just how much he wanted- no, fucking shut up, he scolds himself.

It was dizzying, the encroaching thought, but Bucky knew it explained far more than he was willing to admit to; so he doesn’t. The anger and irritation that masked his lust, the way he yearned for the man’s smiles, why he could never stop thinking about Tony - the man had lured in and trapped Bucky so effortlessly; he never stood a chance. Which was why he’d be damned if he admitted it, even if only to himself. He knew how ludicrous his want was, but that didn’t stop his thoughts. His fantasies. Bucky removes his hands from the woman’s hips and whips around, coming face-to-face with a man he doesn’t recognize, but does nothing to stop the other man as their lips meet with unabashed want.

This man wasn’t Stark (wasn’t Tony), not by a long shot, but could be enough to sate him for the night.

“Like what you see?” The woman behind him purrs into his ear, Bucky shivers as he pulls away from the kiss, and the man grins. “Because we like what see see…”

“Fancy joining us for the night?” The man asks with his hands - no, both their hands - still on his hips, the smooth English accent making Bucky feel a little bolder, but Bucky wouldn’t admit it was because it was a far-cry from the New York accent with a haunting tone that had been replaying in his mind.

It’s a bit of a struggle to find his friends and get his phone back, but Bucky and his nameless companions managed, and with a farewell - and extremely embarrassing jeering - from his friends Bucky and the couple leave the club. It’s blur of tongue and teeth after that, demanding hands hot and heavy with intent, they hop into a cab and then stumble into the duo’s apartment, none of them waste time disrobing the other. It’s sloppy and rough, a jumble of excited hands and breasts and cocks; messy and exactly what Bucky needs. Bucky lets the man fuck him while his wife - was it his wife? - sits on his face, he takes what he wants and gives both of them they want, too - much is his enjoyment comes from knowing his partner, or partners, in this case, are satisfied. Bucky tastes copper when he bites down on his lower lip, stifling a moan as the woman works him over the edge as her partner’s hips stutter, his own hands clawing at the messy sheets as he finishes; Bucky’s eyes screw shut, flashes of the engineer playing behind them, and only just managing to keep Tony Stark’s name from ever escaping past his teeth.

It was at that moment, as he lays sated between the two sleeping bodies and still feels a wanting ache in his chest, that Bucky knows he’s well and truly fucked.

The admissions slips past his control, the string of words all but invading his mind.

I want him.

I want Tony Stark.

Bucky softly groans, right hand digits pinching at the bridge of his nose, fuck!
“Well I was thinking that if we moved this verse towards the end, it would still make sense and fall in better with the rhythm guitar,” Steve - Bucky’s childhood best friend and rhythm guitarist - suggests, the tip of his lead pencil scraping against the draft of their music sheets to illustrate his point.

Bucky takes a moment to consider the change, visualizing the edits in his mind before nodding, “I think the we could add in the drum solo to finish off the track, lord knows Clint is itching to do one.”

Steve chuckles and nods, jotting the notes down, “I’ll run it by Natasha to see how the bass will fit in, and we gotta make sure it doesn’t mess with Sam’s electric sections, but…I think we’re actually making really good head way with the next EP.”

Bucky hums, nodding as he takes another sip of his lukewarm latte, gearing himself up for the conversation he’d been thinking about how to broach since accepting the job with Stark Industries, “hey Stevie, there’s actually another reason I asked to see you today.”

The blond raises a thick brow, prompting, and Bucky inhales breaking the news as best he can. At least the easy part was over, that being telling Steve that he was working with Tony on his company’s latest campaign, which was why his childhood best friend looked like he was trying to pass a damn kidney stone over the mug of his cappuccino. However, now came the hard part, getting him to not lose his shit; so far, Bucky was failing pretty badly.

“You’re working with Stark?!” Steve chokes out, looking at Bucky as though he’d suddenly sprouted a second head.

At least Bucky had been expecting this reaction, so he’d prepared for it.

“Yes, Steve, I am and so is Clint-”

“Are you kidding? After everything he’s done to you guys-”

“-to be fair it’s clear he’s trying to right what he’s wronged-”

“-and you’re just fine working for him-”

“-yes we are because-”

“-have you lost your minds-”

“Steven Grant Rogers, SHUT UP!” Bucky finally snaps, losing his patience, and in a strange role-reversal finds himself in the position Clint had been a few days ago, “Stark definitely fucked up, but he hadn’t known about Stane’s dealings, and when he found out the guy tried doing everything he could to fix it; he still is, when we all know he doesn’t have to. Give the guy a chance Stevie, he really is trying, and even if you still feel - by the end of all this - that you hate him, I’ll respect that. But working with Stark means I can finally get this painful piece of shit Hammer stuck onto me off.”

Steve goes silent for a moment, and Bucky’s silently thankful to his best friend that the man genuinely does seem to be taking in his words (he was always the better person, like that, despite being a stubborn ass most of the time), “the Hammer prosthetic hurts you?”

Bucky sighs, not even realizing he’d said as much in his ranting, but decides it’s time to put all his cards on the table and nods, “it does, maybe the tech is aging or maybe it was shit to begin with - Tony would adamantly argue the latter - but we were living paycheck to paycheck back then, Stevie, so it was the best we could do. Now though…Stark is offering us a chance to get upgrades for free and all he asks in return is that we promote his work, and don’t get me wrong, I felt the same way you do, but…really, give the guy a chance, he may surprise you. And I’d really like my best friend
there for me when I go under the knife.”

The guitarist sighs, relenting, “thanks for tellin’ me, Buck, I’m sorry I made you feel like you couldn’t, but of course I’ll be there for you, ’til the end of the line, remember?”

Bucky smiles softly at that, the childhood promise never failed to lighten his heart, “’til the end of the line, you little shit.”

“So…when are you seein’ him again?”

“In about an hour.” Bucky sips at the -now cold - dredges of his latte, setting the empty mug down, “I was going to head over after this, Stark needs a few more measurements or something before I head in for surgery.”

Steve nods with a look of consideration, and Bucky knows what he’s about to ask before the question leaves his best friend, “can I come with?”

“Only if you promise not be be an utter ass,” Bucky answers immediately, he makes sure to keep his tone light, playful, but needs Steve know he isn’t joking.

The blond doesn’t smile, instead the all too familiar resolve of determination colors his best friend’s features, “I promise, I gotta make sure my best friend’s taken care of, y’know?”

The brunet chuckle softly, picking at the food on his plate, “yeah I do, ya mook.”

A lull of silence falls between the duo, before Bucky sees Steve smile, blindingly wide with a mischievous glint in his eye, “so…how was Saturday night?”

Bucky smirks at his best friend, “well Lance was a treat, brought but sweet, but Bobbi-holy hell that woman is beyond words-”

“-that’s good, you deserved a good night-” Bucky knows what Steve was trying to do, but he was the one who opened this can of worms, and Bucky wasn’t about to stop until his best friend was medical-mystery-red in the face.

“-Lance called her a Hellbeast the next morning-”

“That’s rude-”

“-turns out ‘Hellbeast’ is actually a nickname for this thing Bobbi does with her tongue and fingers that left Lance and I with jelly legs and screaming-”

“BUCKY!” Steve flushes, spluttering, and Bucky barks out a laugh; that shade red cannot be healthy, or humanly possible, he thinks with a smirk.

“You asked, ya lil’ shit!”

“Fancy,” Steve says offendedly with a tone that dripped of sarcasm and contempt.

Bucky sighs, nudging his best friend, “Steve you promised not to be an ass, this guy is helping us out for basically nothing, and I’d rather not get on his bad side.”

Which I haven’t done yet, Bucky notes privately, somehow.
The blond shrugs with faux innocence, “what? I just said it’s fancy.”

*Such a stubborn shit*, Bucky thinks with a shake of his head, elbowing the blond, *for good measure.*

The elevator doors part seconds later, and immediately his eyes find Tony bent over what looks like a prosthesis; Bucky can’t help the bubbling of excitant and anxiety that curls up in his gut, but seeing how his friend immediately glares at Stark dampens his mood, a little. With *another* warning shove to Rogers, the duo move further into the workshop, the familiar sounds of Blue Öyster Cult lowering as JARVIS announces their presence to the inventor. Tony looks up from his work and smiles tiredly at Bucky and Steve, dark circles hanging off his honey eyes, and Bucky feels something cold coil in his chest at the clear lethargy the man tries to mask. However, it’s when his eyes catch on the mess of blotting of purplish-blues and greens that makes Bucky’s heart stutter, his hands turning into fists that twitch to reach out and *hope to fuck* that it’s just a smudging of ink - though Bucky full well knows it damn well isn’t.

“Tony what happened to your face?!” Bucky blurts, tone far more ruthless than he’d meant, but far more *tame* than the anger he feels roiling in his stomach.

Tony seemed taken aback by Bucky’s words, free hand moving to touch the discoloration on his jaw that stands out sickeningly against his pallid skin, but it quickly aborts and instead waves carelessly in the air tryin got dismiss the singer’s worry.

“Dum-E was helping me with some repairs, accidentally whacked me in the face with a wrench, no biggie, happens more often than you think,” he answers, the words coming out with a practiced ease that does *nothing* to ease the sickeningly cold coiling in Bucky’s gut. “Hello there, Tony Stark,” he greets Steve, bypassing the awkward air Bucky had created with his question, and holds out a polite hand.

“Steven Rogers,” Steve answers, taking the offered hand with a level of strength that makes Stark wince, but the man says nothing - Bucky’s hand turn to fists in his effort *not* to smack Steve upside the head.

“Good to meet you.” Tony looks at Bucky, gesturing to the chair he’d taken up a seat on before, “I just need a few more measurements that Dr. Cho - the primary surgeon on your case - ordered, and I can note down any customizations you might want to add on to the arm, otherwise everything is on track and we can get your surgery out of the way by next week so you can start on the post-surgery stuff as soon as possible, sound good? Alright then, just take your shirt off and have a seat, Mr. Rogers, you can chill out on the couch for the time being, if you want.”

Bucky moves to sit on the chair situated by the work table, and Steve remains at his side, watching the genius with a level of unmasked suspicion that makes Bucky want to kick Steve out of the damn lab. Setting his shirt on his lap, Bucky expects this this to be similar to when he’d been at Hammer Tech, and prepares himself for cold uncaring hands to handle him, but once again Tony surprises him. His hands are gentle, if a little calloused - from the manual labor Bucky would have *never* thought he did - when they touch his skin, skilled fingers work along where grafted skin met metal and mumbled a few commands to JARVIS as he went. Tony had works on his arm during their last time together, but each time Tony touches him he’s surprised by how much the man seems to *care* about his comfort, checking in with Bucky and explaining things as he goes - fuck knows Hammer’s people *never* did that, because if Bucky wasn’t screaming or crying, then clearly he was ‘fine’.

Bucky watches Tony work silently, content on having the man this close and touching him, but the warmth he’d expected to feel is undercut by the sight of the bruising on the smaller man’s face. His answer from earlier didn’t sit well with Bucky, it *had* to be a lie, because despite how clumsy his bots clearly were, he doubted they were *that* reckless. *Tiberius Stone*, his mind states, and suddenly
Bucky feels murderous. Had Stone done that to Tony? It made sense, the look in his eyes from the other night, his rush to get him and Clint out of his house the second Stone arrived, and the look in Tiberius’s eyes when Tony started talking back before backing down; the predatory edge to the man’s gaze and demeanor had set Bucky on edge, and yet he still left Tony alone with the man, why didn’t I fight harder to stay? Could he have prevented this? Could he have protected Tony that night? Why wasn’t there a news report about the attack? However, the thought gives itself away to another - crushing - thought; has this happened before?

“While I do this, is there any specific customizations you want with the final version?” Tony asks, pulling Bucky from his downward spiraling of thoughts, eyes snapping back up to meet his honey-brown.

“What kind of stuff are we talkin’ about?” Bucky tries for casual, and hope he lands it, unsure how he sounds past the ringing in his ears.

“Well aside from vibrating fingers?” Tony says jokingly, and Bucky chortles, reaching for a screwdriver that almost looks like a needle. “I can change the color, add artwork, or even make a synthetic skin, but don’t worry none of it will hinder the sensors.”

Bucky’s attention catches on the last of the proffered customizations, and glances over at Steve who looks just as taken aback, before turning to look at the Stark prothesis laid on a different work table - it was a leg, for Danvers probably, and the metal was sleek and captivating. Bucky muses that there was a time he’d have jumped at the opportunity, immediately agreeing to a chance at having his arm back - even if it was only fancy tech masquerading as his arm - but as the years wore on Bucky had changed, and now just the thought of trying to hide any part of himself made himself feel more than a little uncomfortable. If looks anything like the leg, it’ll look amazing, which is a plus, he thinks to himself, before looking back at Tony. Why did I leave? He morns, struck anew at the sight of bruises as his right hand fingers twitch on his thigh, itching to reach out and smooth away the ache Tony must still feel.

“Bucky?” Steve prompts, but Bucky keeps his focus on Tony, knowing his choice - this is who he was now, and he wouldn’t change anything about himself.

“If Stevie makes some art for the arm, think you can apply that on it?”

Tony smiles up at him, it’s a small whisper of a thing, but it’s still there and it almost has Bucky thinking he’d passed some kind of test, before the man answers, “of course, it’ll be like a tattoo though, permanent and prominent, that okay with you?”

“Sounds good to me, Stevie’s done most of the artwork for my tattoos anyway,” Bucky smiles, turning to Steve who says nothing, knowing this was Bucky’s choice and Bucky’s alone. “Think you’re up to the challenge, Rogers?”

Steve snorts, “please, give me a week.”

“An entire week? You’re losing your touch, Stevie,” Bucky chides, laughing when the blond flicks his ear.

For the first time since Bucky entered the workshop that day Tony barks a laugh, gleeful eyes watching he and Steve’s bantering, shaking his head in what could only be described as fond. Bucky couldn’t help but feel like he’d hang the moon if it meant he got to see and hear - if not be the reason - for more of Tony’s musical laughs.

“It’s fine, the arm won’t go on right away, after surgery we’d need to make sure the new plating and
all the connectors - nerves and otherwise - are all functional before attaching the arm, so Mr. Rogers has all the time he’d need,” both men nod, Bucky couldn’t lie, he was a little bummed at having to wait to get the new arm (though he’d already known that, it was in the guidelines of what his surgery and following recovery entailed), but he trusted Tony’s judgment and- wait, when did I start trusting him?

Steve and Tony start talking about what kind of designed would go best on the arm, to make it it was clear and wouldn’t get lost on the prosthetic, but all Bucky could focus on was Tony and those damn bruises and how much he just wanted to pull the man close and keep him safe and- and….

Yeah, Bucky had it pretty bad.

Shit.
**Beginning of the End**

Chapter Summary

It was time Tony mended some bridges (and perhaps find new ones along the way)

Chapter Notes

Warning, panic attack!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony stares blankly down at the device - *BLOOD TOXICITY 32%* - but can’t bring himself to care about the rise in his blood poisoning, in his slow approaching death, because Tony was still reeling from the events of two weeks earlier. It shouldn’t haven been a surprise, at least not really, and yet Tony had still - stupidly - been caught off guard.

Tony loathed the sterile smell of hospitals, each and every visit reminded him of the days after he’d returned from the cave, when board members and shareholders alike tried booting him from the company after he’d shut down the weapons manufacturing of S.I., all claiming the same thing (the same lie); ‘incompetency’. For a while, he’d believed them, believed he was broken; Tony spent many of those - days and - nights staring at the bottom of a bottle. For a while, he had no one, because even Pepper, Rhodey, and even Happy took some convincing to come around. However, in a particularly bad stupor, he’d remembered Yinsen; it reminded him that no, I’m doing the right thing, and it was that belief that helped Tony crawl out of his demons in a bottle.

He couldn’t waste his second chance.

Tony stared down at the unconscious body on the operating table, the smell of rust worrying at his senses (damn Hammer and his shit work, he silently curses for the millionth time), but he pushed forward and worked with Dr. Cho to ensure Bucky’s neural-links and nerve endings were properly connected. The replaced parts, plates, and the shoulder hinge were all implanted perfectly - mistakes, or failure, was not an option to Tony. To Helen’s surprise, Stark’s natural witty banter even seemed absent in those moments, something she pointed out, but didn’t seem too chagrined about; Tony couldn’t even fathom joking around while Bucky could flatline at any second, it wasn’t likely, but in any complex surgical case, anything was a possibility. Barnes was deep under and things were going far better than Tony and Helen had initially hoped for, Hammer had already made the necessary ‘edits’ to Bucky’s body, as Dr. Cho had put it, so all they had to do was replace Hammer’s - poor excuse for - tech with Tony’s - much superior - tech. However, it was clear whatever plating Bucky - and maybe even hundreds, if not thousands of other people as well - had implanted by Hammer was not built to last, parts of the subpar metal grafted around and into muscle, bones and nerves already rusting or eroding; it explained Bucky’s trouble using the prosthetic, and the pain that went along with it. Tony needed to clean up this mess, and shut down Hammer’s work in prosthetics in the process, because he could not stand for this; couldn’t live out the little time he had left knowing Hammer had fucked over so many people that just wanted their lives back.
Finally, Stark stepped back and stared down at his and Helen’s work, his part here was done; this was all he could do for Barnes, and now the rest was left to Dr. Cho. Despite having done his part in Bucky’s surgery, the engineer continued to linger; taking his time pulling off blood-stained latex gloves and scrubs, tossing them into the medical waste bin, washing his hands a bit longer than necessary - he didn’t want to leave, not yet. Couldn’t. A large part of Tony didn’t want to leave the OR, wanting to stay put and help in any way he could, but knowing he’d be more of a nuisance than helpful he quickly exits the operating theater before he could second-guess himself. However, Tony gives in to the need to watch over the remainder of Bucky’s surgery, and finds himself standing in the observation room, but as he watches Helen mend skin and muscle with metal, Tony doesn’t know if he feels happy or sick.

The surgery is going well, amazingly actually, and yet as Tony watches the procedure reaching its end he feels colder, somehow. Barnes seemed like such a warm person, of course you’d be the one to turn him into a cold machine, just like you did to yourself, his mind whispers, and the sad part was, Tony knew it was true. Everything he ever touched or cared about, one way or the other, turned cold and metallic. Maybe he and Medusa had more in common than he realized. Whatever flame of slight elation Tony may have felt was extinguished in that moment, he could almost feel the foam congealing in his chest...it was an odd thing. However, before he could turn to leave, Tony felt a hand grip his forearm and yank him around, he blinked at the man that stared at him with unabashed suspicion and honestly thought, I expected this a lot sooner.

“Why are you doing this?” Steve demands, eyes hard as he stares Tony down, dressed in the scrubs even the observation room demanded be worn. “I checked with the other volunteers, none of them needed you in the OR room because Dr. Cho is more than qualified to handle these surgeries, but here you are; what do you want from Bucky?”

“Want?” Tony repeats, incredulous, as he tries pulling his arm away from Rogers’ tightening grip, “I don’t want anything from him, I’m just trying to help.”

“Bullshit Stark, everyone wants something.”

Tony knew better, he really did, but something in him snapped at that moment and the words left him before he could stop them, “all I ‘want’ is to help someone whose life I had a hand in ruining before I die, and since that won’t be long, Barnes is the only person I can do that for!”

Steve’s hold on Tony’s arm falters enough for him to yank away, only to still when his words register in his mind, both men now gaping dumbly at the other. Shit. Way to go, Stark.

“What do you mean you’re dy-”

“Drop it, Rogers,” Tony cuts in, his heart beating a little too fast for comfort with anxiety - he places his hand over his chest (over the arc reactor hidden there), and pleads for it not to suddenly give out, not yet.

“Tony-”

Damn that man, damn him and his damn earnest fucking voice, but the jig was up; instead of trying to deny it Tony sighs - damage control time, Tony, he thinks, with a voice that sounds oddly like Pepper.

“I’m dying Rogers, it won’t be long now, and I wanted to help at least one person before I was gone,” Tony relents, glancing back at the screen separating him and Steve from the operating theater - from Bucky. “It’s my fault Barnes lost his arm, that Clint all but lost his hearing, so the least I can do is try to help them get it back, okay? Now please, drop it.”
Rogers considers his words, teeth worrying at his lower lip for a moment, “does he know?”

“No one does,” the engineer shakes his head, adding with a pointed look, “and I’d prefer it stay that way.”

“Too-”

“Don’t make me be the asshole that has to threaten you with a gag order to make sure you stay quiet about this,” Tony warns, but knows that he sounds far more exhausted and pleading than threatening, scrubbing a hand down his face in hopes of hiding whatever pathetic expression he’s wearing. “Steve, just drop it…please.”

Rogers watches Tony for a moment, before nodding, the relief Tony feels may be slight but it’s relief all the same, “y’know that keepin’ secrets never ends well, for anyone…right?”

“Nothing with me ever does, Rogers,” Tony huffs out, his laugh tired and tinged with something he’d rather not analyze, he meets the blond’s gaze for a moment and tries to smile, “too late to change that now.”

It’s too late to change anything now, really, he thinks as he casts one last glance at Bucky’s prone form on the operating table. Much too late, Tony turns, leaving Rogers alone in the observation room.

He didn’t deserve to be there when Barnes woke up.

Walking out into the hospital’s hallway, Tony pulls out his phone, but before he can make the call a familiar figure waves to him; Clint.

“Tony!” The man calls out before he can avoid speaking to them, it’s not that he wants to avoid Clint - Tony rather liked the scatter brained drummer - but his talk with Steve left him far too raw; exposed.

“Hey Clint,” Stark answers back, trying to fit on a mask that felt taut on his face while walking over to the small group, coming to a stop at - what Tony assumes is - Bucky’s friends.

“How’s the surgery going?” One of the men asks, his voice hits Tony as a gentle one, before he chuckles and backtracks, holding out a hand, “sorry, we’re just anxious, I’m Sam Wilson.”

“Nice to meet you Sam, Tony Stark,” Tony’s puts on his best smile, forcing his hands to steady before taking the man’s hand.

“This is Natasha and Phil,” Clint introduces the others, each taking Tony’s hand as they’re introduced, but something about the redhead makes Tony want to raise his defenses, harden them; it’s the way she looks at him, almost like she can see through him and…dear God Tony hopes he isn’t as transparent about his frayed nerves as he feels.

“Nice to meet you all. How have the hearing aids been treating you, Clint?” He asks, yes he wants to know, but the lull in speaking on his part gives him time to properly rebuild whatever walls Rogers had mowed down in the observation room.

“Like a dream!” Barton gushes, grinning like a fiend as he nudges the suited man at his side, “this one’s been real good about testing it, telling me off every chance he get.” the fondness in Clint’s voice for the man - Phil - makes Tony helpless but to grin, and he doesn’t seem to be the only one, the man himself is lips twitch upwards - no matter how much he seems to try to remain stoic over the teasing,
“To answer your question Sam, Barnes is surgery is actually going really well; by the nature of her profession Dr. Cho doesn’t assume optimism until everything is on the up and up, but even she seems a little giddy with how everything’s going.” Tony says, watching the way four sets of shoulders seem to unanimously relax, despite the smiles of ease each one had worn this whole time - Tony knew that feeling, trying to stay positive until you were told everything was going to be alright; it’s a small step in the right direction, Tony thinks to himself.

The trio begin to chat before Clint turns to Tony, “and you? Are you okay?” It’s a loaded question, Tony knows it is, Clint’s emotions just seem to bleed into his eyes within seconds and Tony feels caught off guard; his chest twinges, and knows, for once, it isn’t because of the literal hole there.

“Yeah buddy, just a little misunderstanding is all,” Tony prides himself on not flinching when Clint reaches up to gently trace his fingertips over his jawline, as though he could see Stone’s work, even though it was long gone by then - maybe Bucky said something to him, Tony thinks, though he wonders why the man would care.

“Well...if there are any other 'misunderstandings' with that douche, just say the word and we’ll make sure no one ever finds his sorry ass again, okay?” Tony didn’t notice it until right then, a small hush that fell over the group to their side as they turned their gaze to him, and Tony wanted to shrug Clint’s words off with a laugh but…their eyes; he knew Clint damn well meant what he said and somehow, by extension, his promise extended to his friends who looked at Tony with gentleness and…respect? That…that can’t be right, Tony’s mind stutters, so instead he does what he’s best at; he deflects.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Clint, thank you, but trust me all I really need right now is a good cup of Joe-”

“We should take you for a coffee,” the redhead - Natasha - jumps in, her voice nonchalant, but her eyes are sharp, and for the life of him Tony worries about what the hell she sees when she looks at him.

“I…I couldn’t impose-”

“I think that’s a great idea!” Sam jumps in, wide grin and soft features almost making Tony feel like a bully if he tried to turn the man down, “it’s the least we can do,” Wilson adds, gaining a nod from Phil and Clint.

“I’ll even get you a muffin, you like muffins right?” The drummer asks, but cuts in with a pat on Tony’s shoulder before the engineer can even speak, ”of course you do, everyone likes muffins. We’ll see you tomorrow then? How does noon sound?”

“Tomorrow’s good for Sam and me, there’s actually this place just across the street from Stark Tower I’ve been wanting to try,” Natasha and Sam nod in agreement, and Tony knows that café, Kamala was his favorite barista - sweet kid, saving up to try and move to Manhattan to work at Stark Tower after graduating, but her full-ride scholarship letter should be sent to her around finals, Tony made sure of that - after all, but the place is no where to write home about.

“Sounds like a plan, what do you say, Tony?” Phil finally speaks, his eyes look just as sharp as Natasha’s, but not as piercing; it’s as though where Natasha’s gaze demands, Phil’s eyes seem to ask.

“Yeah…yeah sure, sounds good,” Tony answers, honestly stunned, because...what the hell?

“Awesome! I have your number, I’ll text you the details,” Clint’s eyes seem to travel over Tony’s
head, who looks back to see Steve stepping out of the observation room, the surgery must be over, Tony concludes, but before he can say his goodbyes Clint yanks him into a bear hug, “we’ll see you tomorrow!”

Tony watches, in - honestly - a bit of a daze as the group move to meet their friend, the little huddle is loud and rambunctious but still respectful of their surroundings, each taking a turn to hug Steve - shit, Clint really did just hug me, the hell? but despite his confusion, Tony couldn’t find it in himself to be put off by it, no, it actually made him like the drummer a little more. Stark could tell how close they all were, whether it was what they had been through together, or just that they trusted each other. Tony felt kind of envious at their clear ease around each other, the happiness and trust that just seemed to radiate from each other them, the only people he could think of that he was that close to were Pepper, Rhodes, and Happy… but even they seemed to be at arm’s length from Tony since he’d gotten back. It’s a two-way street, Tony, they might have put some distance in between you and them after Afghanistan, and everything that followed, but you’re the one who shut the door on them, and it was true but…the distance was good, the distance would make the end of all this less painful. For everyone.

Steve’s eyes meet Tony’s over Sam’s shoulder, the change in those azure eyes - the sudden sadness - effectively snapping him back into reality, turning around Tony shakes his head and tries to remember; he was doing something before all that, right? Shit, make the call! Tony looks down at the phone in sat idly in his hand, and finally calls the person he’d meant to since stepping out of the observation room, making his way towards the hospital’s parking lot.

“Pep?”

“Hey Tony,” her voice warms him, eases the cold within his chest.

“Can you get me a meeting with Jeri?”

“If this is another scandal, Ms. Hogarth really may scalp you this time- ”

“No, it’s not a scandal, trust me,” Pepper doesn’t say anything, letting Tony explain, “but I think it’s time we took down Hammer, for good, don’t you?”

“Tomorrow at nine, that good for you? ” Tony can almost hear the grin in her voice, he wasn’t the only one who loathed Hammer and his corner-cutting, after all.

“Nine’s perfect,” Tony casts one last glance at the group over his shoulder, watching them laugh with an ease he hadn’t felt since before he’d lost his mother, “also, please pencil in a coffee date for noon, I have somewhere I need to be,” ending the call, Tony turns the corner and straightens his shoulders; Bucky may have suffered through Hammer’s cheap trick of a prosthetic, but no one else would, not if Tony had anything to say about it.

So far Rogers had kept his promise, and Tony was more than a little grateful that he didn’t have the media - or worse, Pepper and Rhodes, or even Carol - on his case about his little secret. Though the most unexpected outcome from that the hospital, was the weekly coffee dates with one - if not all - of Bucky’s friends. Apparently they’d all served together, barring Coulson, who found the little ragtag group during their early days in music, and Tony respected each and every one of them; thought it still escaped them how none of them tried to throttle him. Tony knew, on a good day, that he was annoying, but to have been the reason their friends had been hurt and still invite him out for coffee? Apparently Saints are a thing, Tony mused to himself, shining of the times even Steve had joined their little coffee dates, and managed to not snipe or glare at him.

It was hard, though, not asking how Bucky was doing but none of them seemed to press the subject.
with Tony; which he honestly appreciated, but the man was busy enough with his new routine post-surgery. Sam was gentle and insightful, if a little bit of a shit; Phil was stoic but kind, and would leave little sprinkles of genius-level sarcasm Tony couldn’t get enough of. Clint was his usual brash but sweet in a puppy-humping-your-leg kind of way, and Tony was both fascinated and warmed by his relationship with Phil. Natasha was…well, Natasha was brazen and blunt, but it was so damn refreshing after living so long in a world that did nothing but lie to him that…that he adored her for it - he even introduced her to Pepper; if Tony thought Pepper could move worlds, and that Natasha was a force of nature, it shouldn’t have been a surprise that their combined forces would make Armageddon look like a toddler’s play date, pray for anyone who dared cross either woman.

It scared Tony, a little, though; these people - these amazingly kind people - were coming into his life, so close when he was about to exit it and-

“Sir, you have an incoming call from Ms. Potts,” JARVIS announces cutting into his thoughts, and just like every other time those two weeks, Tony felt himself tense slightly.

“Put her through, J.”

“Tony, I need your help with the guest list for your birthday,” Tony feels his shoulders slump with the release in tension, so he wasn’t found out, yet.

“Sure, what’s up?”

Pepper began to prattle on about how he was no longer a teenager and should make a proper event out of his birthday, and - just like every other attempt she made at the same point - Tony refused; if this was going to be his last birthday, there was no way he wasn’t going out without a bang because-…fuck, this really is going to be my last birthday, there’s no ‘if’ about it, is there? With his blood toxicity levels steadily rising, Tony wouldn’t make it past thirty-nine, and right then something heavy and cold settles in his stomach at the realization. I’m dying…I’m really dying. It felt far too soon, he knew he was running out of time, but somehow, it just hit Tony right then; he was dying. He’d said it to himself enough, was shown the numbers and felt the effects of his body slowly shutting down, and yet…somehow the realization that he wouldn’t make it to forty was the final straw.

There’s no getting out of it this time, Tony. You’re a ticking time bomb about to go off, and the scariest realization from that thought was but when? Because there was no countdown, he could estimate, sure, but there was nothing solid for Tony to rely on; there were no numbers or equations he could look to, nothing to know when that one breath would be his last. When asked the question ‘would you rather know when you’ll die, or how?’ is asked, more often than not people choose the latter, rather knowing what to avoid in a - albeit false - hope that they’d live longer. Because who would want to know about a fixed point in time that would not - could not - be changed? Yet sitting there on his ‘shop’s couch, his chest tightening with anxiety more and more with each passing second, Tony suddenly couldn’t understand how people were willing to settle with the ‘how’ and not the ‘when’.

Right then, the uncertainty of the ‘when’ only made it all the worse.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice shakes the man from his thoughts, “I swear if you put me on mute again-”

“No.” Tony quickly cuts in, hoping to quell the woman, praying she doesn’t hear the quiver in his voice. “I’m here Pep, I promise.”

But for how much longer?
There was a slight pause and Tony curses her for knowing him oh so well, too well, before her voice filters once again through the speakers, “Tony is something wrong?”

“No, Pep, I’m-” Tony cuts himself off, because there was something wrong, but he couldn’t tell Pepper that - she didn’t need the unnecessary stress, because this was something even Pepper couldn’t fix; he would have never believed that was even possible. “I love you, Pepper…you know that, right?”

“Of course I do, Tony,” she answers almost immediately, and Tony’s heart swells slightly, but he can hear the undercurrent of worry in her tone and knows he has to cut the call off before he says something they’ll both regret. “I love you too.”

Tony nods, despite knowing she can’t see him with the video disabled, “good, that’s…good.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, Pep, I’m fine,” Tony promises, it’s a lie, but it wouldn’t be the first time he’d lied to Pepper for her own good. “Do you mind if I call you back? I got- I have stuff…sorry,” Tony gestures for JARVIS to end the call, and the line cuts out just as Pepper starts to speak.

Tony stares down at his hands, the limbs suddenly trembling as his vision blurs, “I’m dying, J… I’m really dying….”

“I know, Sir,” the AI replies to the rhetorical words, the matter of fact answer undercut by the melancholy coating them, and Tony feels his chest tighten all over again.

Breathe, he thinks, shaky hands shooting up to clutch at the fabric over his heart, fucking breathe Tony! And he does, but only just, fighting through the pins and needles he feels break out over his skin, and moves to curl up on the cold floor. Every breath is ragged and painful, his lungs burning with each intake, and Tony feels fear course through him as his mind flashes with images of water; flashes of near-death. He was dying, after everything he’d lived through, fought through, Tony Stark was dying. ‘Don’t waste it…don’t waste your life…’ Ho Yinsen’s final words - the words that would forever be seared into Tony’s mind - whisper back to life, and the man wouldn’t admit to nearly choking on his tears as they replayed over and over again in his head.

“I-I’m trying, I swear…I swear I’m trying, Yinsen.” Tony rasps out, nails scratching down the front of his face, some pathetic part of him hoping to silence his mind with the pain.

Tony gasps for air as he tugs at his hair, eyes screwed shut, because he really was trying to leave behind something that would better the world in someway before he died; shutting Hammer down, the prosthetics line, green energy, hell even the Expo - he was trying but…he knew it still wasn’t enough, it’ll never be enough, you know that, Tony. It was such a simple word - a simple thought - before, ‘death’, but now it threw Tony for a sickening loop every time it came to mind; every notion of the word ingrained a finality within Tony. It’s all over, he thought as he stood on shaky legs. Any attempts at sobriety were fruitless now, so Tony shamelessly snatches up a bottle from his ‘shop’s kitchenette cabinet and screws the cap off; the first drink always made him cringe ever so slightly, even as he got older and more used to the acrid burn, but by the fifth swallow Tony felt warm. Calm.

It wasn’t healthy, he knew, but he was dying. So.

With the cheap whiskey burning its way down his throat, Tony tries to lose himself for the night. For the first time in months he tries to forget who he is, what he’s done, and what will happen; just for one goddamn night, please, let me forget. Perhaps Tony should have never escaped the cave, should have given in to the cardiac arrest when Stane ripped the arc reactor from his chest, instead of fighting it; should have done the world a favor and just died. But he was dying, wasn’t he? So
maybe he wasn’t a total failure, maybe he could still do something right. Tony’s unsteady on his feet as he walks back over to his swivel chair, all but falling onto the office furniture, no longer wincing as he chugs down the whiskey until his body protests, forcing the rim away from his lips lest he throw up everything he’d drank so far - and even if it was cheap, it would still be a waste. Tony stares blearily at the bottle, the fast chugging making his head spin and bile coat his molars, but feels entranced by the sloshing amber liquid.

“So you’re dyin’, Stark,” he hears himself say, the words slow and lazy, just shy of proper slurring, “you can’t stop it…accept that- that there’s nothing you can do.”

Up until that moment, some small part of Tony had been hoping, silently praying for genius to strike like it had in the cave. Some part of him wishing that maybe, even if just one last time, Tony would be able to save himself; Obi had called him a ‘golden goose’, maybe he even believed he had one more golden egg to lay. However, now…now he really had to accept that that wasn’t happening.

“Cry if you need…” he trails, cheeks pulling slightly taut from dried tears, “but do somethin’, somethin’- fuck what did Yinsen say? ‘Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark?’”

Tony chortles as his lips wrap around the mouth of the bottle, taking a two long pulls of liquid courage.

_He was a crazy bastard who put his faith in the wrong person_, Tony’s inner demons mock, and he can’t help but flinch at the words, _you’re the reason he’s dead after all, Anthony._ His mocking demons always sounded like Ty.

“Maybe not this time,” Tony stares down at the bottle of Bourbon, thumb running over the calligraphy that seems to swim around on the label now, and remembers the way Natasha and Clint would banter; Sam’s easy teasing with Phil and Natasha, Clint’s natural tactile-ness with his best friends - _I don’t think I can do this alone anymore_, right then knew that he was a selfish, _selfish_ man because- “J, I have some brunt bridges to fix, don’ you think?”

Tony could almost _hear_ the warm smile in his AI’s tone, “should I call Master Rhodes, Sir?”

Stark nods, reeling a little when just _seconds_ later he hears the familiar voice of a man he thought of as _his brother_ since he was nothing more than a snot-nosed teenager at MIT, “_hey Tony, how are you man?”_

Tony can’t help but smile, despite the warm salt-tinged streaks sliding down his cheeks, “I miss you Platypus.”

“_I miss you too, Tones,”_ Rhodey replies back without a moment’s hesitation, and Tony sprawls out on his couch, setting aside his liquor, “_now what’s this Carol tells me about me owning you lunch?”_

Tony bursts into a fit of giggles.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to all of y'all for reading, and your lovely comments, I LOVE hearing from each and every one of you! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'll see you lovely humans next time! xxoxoo
To Confess Without Words

Chapter Summary

Natasha and Tony have some coffee, and Tony finds a way to speak without, really, speaking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony doesn’t tell Rhodey, not the whole truth anyway, but it was good hearing his best friend’s voice again; it had been so long, each and every stilted conversation between them had just reinforced the ‘distance was a good’ narrative in Tony’s mind, but to hear Rhodey laugh? To make actual plans to have dinner again? Tesla on a stick, Tony didn’t realize just how much he’d missed his Platypus until right at that moment. It was almost too easy, though, how much Tony wanted to fall back on old habits of liquor and solitude, but he didn’t; his friends deserved that much. He’d even played third-wheel on a date with Pepper and Happy at the MoMA, it had been Hap’s idea of trying to surprise Pepper and - not so subtly - get her to take a break, Tony just happened to be in the office when he sprung the invite on her; he’d refused at first of course, no one likes playing third-wheel after all and it was supposed to be their ‘together time’, but when Happy bodily drags you out of your office it’s best to save face and just go along with it. Tony remembers a particular, if hilarious, incident involving glitter glue, Happy, a chicken with a mini party hat and a few drag queens in Caracas back in the eighties that established his Do-as-Happy-Says suggestion into law - in Tony’s mind, anyway.

All in all, Tony had actually been feeling kind of…content these past few weeks, which was a state of being he had long forgone even thinking possible; especially now. However, like with all things Tony was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and it seemed today might be the day; he was seeing Bucky for the first time today - in a few hours, in fact - since his surgery, Helen, Eric and Charles kept Tony up-to-date on Bucky’s progress, and it seemed the man was doing well - amazingly, actually - and while Tony felt…happy, yeah, lets keep it at that, to see Bucky again, he was also nervous.

“Thanks Kamala,” Tony smiles at the teenager across the counter of the café he now frequented, picking up and Natasha’s coffees once they were set down, leaving a tip on the counter for the girl.

“No problem, Mr. Stark!” The brunette beams, she always overtly enthusiastic around him, and her optimism never failed to make Tony smile - the fact she worked in customer service and somehow managed to always be so upbeat was enough of a miracle to him.

Turning towards the small two-seater table in the corner where a redhead awaited him, Tony heads over and set down the drinks before taking his seat. Natasha always kind of put Tony on edge, though not in a bad way, but…he could never quite figure her out, and that both scared and intrigued him. Ms. Romanova had served with Bucky and his unit, apparently she hadn’t even safe from the damage his weapons had caused their team, though it had been Sam that took the physical damage by saved her from being burned alive - the man had the scars to prove it, even if they both lacked the animosity towards the cause of it all.

“Bucky tells me he’s seeing you today to fit his arm?” She starts, taking a sip of her tooth-rottingly
sweet coffee, though Tony couldn’t honestly judge, his own would probably raise blood-sugar levels with just a glance - but at least he tried at classy by forgoing the whipped cream.

“Yeah, him and Steve,” Tony nods, savoring the sweetly bitter flavor for a moment, “I’m actually surprised they’re not here, or that Bucky hasn’t come to these little coffee outings.”

“I told him not to,” Natasha answers so nonchalantly Tony almost wonders if he’d heard wrong, but…why would she tell Bucky not to come? As though reading his thoughts, the woman continues, “you needed space, Tony, it was clear after you’d left his surgery…was I mistaken?”

The slight raise of her brow was enough of an indicator for Tony to know that, no, she knew she had been right in doing so, but…fuck, some childish part of him wanted for Bucky to just show up; to take the choice out of his stupidly emotional hands. At the time, distance was key, and even now Tony doesn’t exactly know how much of himself he can be honest about with those around him, but Bucky…Bucky had almost started becoming a sort of calming balm to Tony’s neurosis and-

“You know, you remind me a lot of my mother,” once again, Natasha catches Tony off guard, but he tries to remain unaffected by her seemingly random words - or at least, look unaffected.

“I’ve been told I have a certain ‘feminine charm’,” he tries to joke, to deflect, but it seems like Romanova won’t have it, shaking her head as she goes forward undeterred by his words.

“She was funny, like you, too…would always laugh when things got hard, even if she was drowning in the shit hand life gave her, she always laughed,” Tony’s chest seizes a little at that, the other shoe seemed to be dropping a few hours earlier than he’d expected, but Natasha still looks just as calm and elegant as ever while Tony felt himself paling. “My mother loved us, my brother Vindiktor and me, she raised us with an iron fist but a kind heart, but only because she knew she couldn’t afford to waste her time.”

“Natasha I-” his words sound strangled, even to his own ears, but the redhead takes his - trembling, shit when did that start? - hand in her own, meeting his eyes as she continues over him.

“She and my brother died in a house fire when I was still very little, but before that she had been sick…very sick, but what I saw in her I see in you; not only the strength, but the loneliness in her eyes, because she thought she had to do it all alone.” Tony feels her manicured thumb gently stoking over the back of his scarred hand, and Tony swallows despite his dry throat, but can’t bring himself to look away. “She never asked for help, even when she needed it because she believed what she had to do must be done alone, but she was wrong…do what you must, Antoshka, but don’t believe you must do it alone.”

There’s a moment, a lull in silence between them with nothing but Natasha’s hand holding his that grounds Tony to reality, “but if…if she was sick, and there was nothing anyone could do to…to fix it, wouldn’t she just have been a burden on everyone if she’d told them?” Tony wants to smack himself, hell, he’d understand if Natasha did so right then; he’d just called her mother a burden! Fuckfuckfuck-

“Some burdens are too much to carry alone, Antoshka, and those that love you will carry that weight with you, no matter the outcome,” the redhead answers easily, her voice still somehow gentle and lacking the anger he’d fully expected to be there, but it hits Tony why right then; Tony knew the story was real, Natasha hadn’t lied to him yet and he didn’t expect her to start now (if ever), but bringing up her mother was a way for Tony to talk about his situation without really…’talking’ about it, so to speak. Natasha knows, she…she’d known this whole time, but…why hadn’t she said anything?
“Because, it was never my story to tell, Antoshka,” is all Natasha says before sitting back in her seat, delicate hand slipping from his, and just like that the ‘moment’ is over. “Did you really give Bucky vibrating fingers?”

It takes Tony a second to register the question, and when he does, the booming laughter he lets out is loud enough other patrons glare over at them, but for the life of him, Tony can’t being himself to care; someone knew, someone really knew and he…he felt lighter for it, somehow. Tony looks up at the redhead through teary eyes, taking in her easy grin but soft green eyes, and the gratitude he feels right then for the woman is almost overwhelming.

Turning to Bucky, Tony gestures to the prosthetic on his table, “there isn’t much left to do, but I wanted you to try it and see how it feels before adding the art customizations you wanted, and like I said last time; I’ve used strong but light materials. However, I have to warn you, it may be a bit overwhelming at first; if you need me to start with a lower level of sensory detection, just let me know, okay?” Bucky nods then watches as Tony moves over and settles down beside him, scooting his stool as close to Bucky’s side as possible to ensure a steady hand, and examines the area not-so-recently operated on.

It’s been a little over a month since his surgery, Dr. Cho, his other assigned medical teams, and Tony had all agreed the arm should be attached within two months post-surgery; giving his body enough time to heal, but not so long it wouldn’t know how to handle the new prosthetic. It was only once his arm was attached that they’d agree to start him on his physical therapy with Dr. Lehnsherr, allowing his body to acclimate to the new prosthesis through his new routine with the man, and make any adjustments - minor ones, Tony assured him - where needed. It was all coming together now, Bucky had spent the better part of his first month after the surgery following Dr. Cho’s post-surgery instructions to the letter to help his healing process, and going to therapy helped his state of mind immensely - a service Bucky didn’t know Tony was, also, covering until Dr. Xavier brought it up during their first session together. However, what irked Bucky more than anything was the fact that the engineer had all but disappeared from Bucky’s life for nearly two months; waking up from surgery, Bucky had expected to see the genius - if only for the man to check his work on the vet - but no…Tony was no where to be seen. It…it didn’t hurt Bucky’s feelings, that’s just childish - Steve and his friends had been there when he woke up, after all - but…it left him feeling hollow, somehow; alone.

Though during their near-two months apart, after the surgery, Bucky couldn’t deny he almost felt like a whole new person. Everything this time around was so different from his time after getting the Hammer Tech arm, this time he had help, support, and didn’t have to agonize over the cost of everything - honestly, there were days Bucky thought he was dreaming. It was almost surreal for Bucky, not only did he have one-on-one sessions with Dr. Xavier every week, but the group therapy sessions comprised of all of Tony’s other participants for the prosthetics line helped him immensely; Bucky knew he wasn’t the only amputee out there, but to know there where others like him, real people he’d begun to befriend like Carol, Riley, and - yes, he’d admit it - even Wade, made him feel less alone. Bucky had been a little surprised to find out that the volunteers weren’t only comprised of military men and women, no, there were even people like Peter Parker, a university student, and Rumiko Fujikawa, a prominent business woman. It made his head spin a little, the amount of people Tony was helping with the pilot program alone; this wasn’t the work of someone who was trying to clean the red out of their ledger by helping vets, but someone who wanted to help everyone.

Dr. Xavier had met with Bucky twice before his surgery, a formality to ensure he was psychologically fit for the operation, but since then Charles had become the one person Bucky felt he
could confide in without fear of embarrassment or risk of being reprimanded; sure, they’d never just meet up for coffee, he was his doctor at the end of the day, but somehow Charles felt more like Bucky’s friend - like someone who genuinely cared for his patients - than just someone hired to make sure the singer was not about to flip his shit. Also, it didn’t help the appearance of abject ‘professionalism’ that Charles all but rooted like a giddy teenager for Bucky to talk to Tony during their therapy sessions, and giggled when Bucky would have damn near coronary all the while, but… it helped, it all helped; even if Bucky couldn’t gather the courage to call - or even text - Tony during their time apart. However, despite the agonizing weeks - yes, he knows he’s being dramatic, shut up, he just went through major surgery he’s allowed a little drama - he hadn’t seen or heard from the engineer, the man was always on his mind, and because of it Bucky couldn’t help but think I miss Tony.

Sure, Bucky new the man was probably insanely busy with his projects and the other volunteers, but there was always that petulant child inside him that wanted to march over to the tower, and demand Tony explain his absence. It didn’t help whatsoever that Tony was meeting up with his friends - even Steve for fuckssake - for coffee during that time, made him feel all the more annoyed. Natasha had told him to stay away, and despite never explaining why, Bucky wasn’t stupid enough to cross her; Clint said they were ‘vetting’ him, though for the life of Bucky, he had no idea why his friends saw the need. So, yeah, weeks of no Tony, and he felt like an addict waiting for their next hit. However, sitting here now, in Tony’s workshop again after so long, Bucky couldn’t find the words and instead chose to stare; clearly Stark has a knack - whether he knew it or not - for striking Bucky speechless. If, clearly, a little dumb. Though, watching the man now, Bucky felt as though something had…changed in Tony, it seemed like a good change, too; his posture didn’t seem as stiff, and his smile felt more…well, it felt more real. Something had happened during their time apart, and Bucky was curious to know what, but if his - incessant - questions to Natasha about her time with Tony had proved anything, it was that he’d have to get the information from the man himself.

Bucky feels Steve’s gaze heavy on the side of his face, but continues to stare at Tony as he works, and can’t help but revel in how warm the man’s hands are. Steve and Bucky had been…not at odds, per se, but Steve had just about done a one-eighty after Bucky’s surgery in regards to his opinion towards the inventor, and Bucky couldn’t fathom what had changed in those few hours - and believe him, he’d tried getting it out of the blond, but short of tasering his best friend into confessing, Bucky was at a loss. Though…it was nice, his best friend not bickering with Bucky when the subject of Tony came up, but instead listening to Bucky when he’d bring up something he’d read about Tony - sometimes Steve would even go so far as to take Charles is side, and encourage Bucky to contact the genius. He may not know what caused the change in his best friend’s view of Tony, but sat here between them without feeling as though he could cut through the tension with a knife was rather nice, so he’d take it; why look a gift horse in the mouth, and all that.

“If you feel any pain, and I mean any at all, please let me know, alright?” Tony says, chocolate eyes flicking up to Bucky for a split second, then glancing past him, and finally back down to the arm’s connecting joint.

Once again Bucky nods, glancing down to his right hand where Steve had taken it into his own, and right then Bucky is so fucking glad Steve came with him - Steve had been there every step of the way, for every appointment and session, both times. Now more than ever, Bucky genuinely wonders what the hell he’d done to have this man as his best friend, but knew he was damn lucky. Bucky squeezes his Steve’s hand with a mixture of trepidation, gratefulness and exhilaration swirling around in his gut, intently watching as Tony works with nimble but gentle fingers. Bucky meets the man’s eyes for a fraction of a second when Tony adjusts one of the connectors, probably looking for any signs of pain or discomfort on Bucky’s end, then looks away upon finding none. However, Bucky doesn’t look away so quickly, instead using Tony’s distraction to allow himself to take in the sight of the engineer’s features; storm grey eyes travel down to the man’s jaw, skating over lips bitten red in
concentration, and Bucky feels flesh his fingers twitch in Steve’s hand with the want to brush the chocolate locks away from Tony’s forehead - wonders how soft the man’s hair would feel against his fingertips.

The weightless feeling of his left arm gone after surgery had been unsettling, but Bucky couldn’t deny that no longer having to endure the near-constant aching pull on the left side of his body - from his spine to his collarbone and ribs - had been a relief, if a jarring one. No matter how much Bucky had gotten used to the arm, the daily aches, the burning feeling in his muscles, and sharp pains he’d felt every other day were always a constant reminder that he only really had one arm; a reminder of all the things he’d lost. The first couple days after surgery, Bucky found himself subconsciously tilting to his left side, body so used to slouching one way because of the arm. However, he’d always smile to himself as he straightened his posture, the missing arm - as disconcerting as it may have been - always reminded him; it wouldn’t be that way for much longer.

“I’m just going to clean the connectors a little and make a few tiny adjustments,” Tony explains as he does just that, making sure to keep Bucky up to date on everything he was doing as he went, and - despite a majority of it going over his head - Bucky appreciated the familiar gesture. “Any pain?”

“No,” the genius glances up at him, brow raised, and Bucky smiles reassuringly. “None, I swear.”

“Right now the calibration is set to normal,” Tony starts once he’s pulled away, reaching for the prosthetic, “which means your left arm will feel like your right, but like I said; I can turn it down if you need me to.”

Bucky swallows thickly despite himself, the relaxed calm from moments ago all but gone as the engineer fits the prothetic into the latch and secures it. It genuinely surprises Bucky, how the prosthetic weighs almost nothing as it hangs limply at his side, he knew what Tony had said, but Hammer had said something along the same lines, too. Tony fiddles with something under a the lifted panel of the arm’s deltoid, working with pin-sized tools before moving his hands away and watching the arm expectantly, but keeps the panel open; maybe to adjust the sensory intake, Bucky thinks. There’s a few moments where Bucky feels nothing, paranoid anxiety building up in his chest that something had gone wrong, that the prosthetic didn’t work, that he’d messed up somehow. However, Bucky is snapped out of the beginnings of a spiral seconds later; it’s almost immediate, the sudden feeling of…well, of feeling.

It’s so overwhelming Bucky’s crying before he even realizes it.

“Switch it off!” Steve barks at Tony, who scrambles to do just that as the blond clutches at Bucky’s right hand and shoulder, “Buck are you okay?!”

But before Tony can reach for the arm’s deltoid, Bucky pulls his right hand from Steve to grip Tony’s wrist, halting him, “n-no! No, don’t please, I just…fuck.”

“I…” Tony stops immediately, and Bucky knows his right hand’s shaking, but doesn’t bother to try to fight it as he smiles through his tears. “I…it…I can feel, Stevie. Holy fuckin’ shit I can fuckin’ feel!”

The duo seem to calm at his words, Bucky looks between them and sees how Steve’s eyes seem to go a little brighter, how Tony’s smiles in a way that’s almost heartbreaking - he’s still clutching onto the man, but Bucky doesn’t dare let go, needing something to ground him that this is real. Bucky looks at his left arm, slowly flexes it - stunningly smooth plates of sleek metal silently shift and calibrate, not missing a beat in his commands - before reaching out, almost in a daze as he touches Tony’s chest. The man tenses but doesn’t pull away, and he can feel it; feels the textures, the ridges of muscle beneath the skin of his pectoral, and moves his hand - his new hand - to squeeze gently at
Tony’s shoulder. Tony had done this, he’d...he’d given Bucky his arm back.

“Thank you,” it takes Bucky a moment to recognize the trembling broken whisper as his own voice, meeting Tony’s eyes, mouth splitting into shaky but wide - and undoubtedly goon-like - smile. “Fuckin’ thank you, Tony… I can’t- I don’t-”

Tony smiles at him in a way that both melts and snares painfully at Bucky’s heart.

“You deserve it, Bucky.”

It’s a close thing, how much Bucky wants to reach out and kiss Tony in that moment.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all SO MUCH for your continued support, reading, and comments on this story! I’m elated you’re all enjoying it as much as I am, and I'll see you next time!

xxoxoo
Something Stupid

Chapter Summary

Bucky has a few words for Tony, and Tony falls back on old habits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was was a less than a week later and Bucky still marveled at his left arm, touching anything and everything he could, sometimes pinching himself in fear that he’d wake up and turn to see the heavy and painful Hammer prosthetic hanging off his shoulder instead of Tony’s brilliant invention. After Bucky had finally calmed down, Tony had told him he could keep the prosthetic on instead of taking it off for the final few upgrades, and Bucky was so relieved he’d almost cried all over again - but he’d managed to keep himself together, somehow. Instead, Tony said he could just return to the lab after a few days and they’d do the upgrades and print on Steve’s art for it in-person, giving Bucky the few days to think over any ways to improve the already perfect prosthetic, and it was honestly unimaginable to Bucky how else he could improve the arm. No longer were the days that his shoulder blades and spine - of not his entire left side - ached from the uneven weight, or wincing when a sudden movement would pull at his muscles wrong. Instead Bucky’s biggest challenge was not crying at the painlessness, at the easy fluidity in his movements, and the feelings his arm now experienced.

Bucky was used to the path to Tony’s workshop by now, showing up a little later than planned, but he’d been so caught up with the band’s latest EP that he’d lost track of time; Tony had told him he’d have the day cleared out for Bucky, so the man just hoped his tardiness hadn’t pissed off the engineer too much. However, Bucky’s worries are quickly discarded when he hears the familiar sound of the genius is voice arguing back with another - also familiar - voice, stepping out of the carriage Bucky looks around expecting to see two people, but only finds Tony talking a mile a minute as he tinkers with something on his workstation desk. Walking further into the workshop Bucky pauses to take in the site of Tony dressed in his usual ratty jeans, but the tank top that clings to his torso is a new - and very welcome - site to the brunet, muscled biceps exposed to him, and Bucky drinks in the naked expanse of glistening skin.

“Tony you can’t just drag those poor people to Monaco just because you feel like it!” The disembodied voice of Pepper argues back, exasperated in a way that tells Bucky she's had to repeat herself on this point more than once.

“Pep, who wouldn’t want to go to Monaco? Plus, I’m not saying we abduct them, whoever wants to come is free to and those that don’t - though I doubt there would be any - are free to do the shoot here,” Tony huffs back, pulling his goggles over to rest on his head as he glares up at hidden speakers, still oblivious to Bucky’s presence.

For a moment Bucky thinks he should duck out and leave them to finish speaking, until Ms. Potts replies, “Tony, between the volunteers’ physical therapy, counseling, and every day lives I doubt any of them would have time to be whisked away by you just because you think it’s a good idea.”
Tony wants to take us to Monaco? Bucky thinks, genuinely taken aback and confused, but he wasn’t one to turn down a free trip and finally speaks up, “Monaco sounds fun.”

Bucky can’t stop the face-splitting grin that takes over when Tony yelps and curses, jumping about three feet into the air, and whips around to glare at him, “you ass!”

The musician chuckles and walks towards Tony, playful eyes still lingering on him, “not my fault you didn’t notice me.”

“Bucky?”

Bucky looks up, unsure of where else to look as he addresses Pepper, “hey Pepper, yeah it’s me, sorry to barge in I didn’t mean-”

“No, no, it’s alright,” she cuts in, quelling Bucky’s worries at having been a rude snoop, “but…do you really think the volunteers would really like a trip to Monaco for the photoshoot?”

“Of course they would Pep-”

“Hush Tony, let the one of the people you’re - possibly - dragging into this answer.”

Bucky glances from the corner of the vaulted ceiling to Tony and back, suddenly feeling like a child caught in between two bickering parents, “I mean, in theory it sounds like a great time, but I don’t know how many of us could afford-”

“This would be a complementary trip.”

“Like I’d let any of you pay.”

Tony and Pepper cut-in in unison, and Bucky can’t help his chuckle, a part of him admiring their synchronicity - even if it was at his expense, “then yeah, I don’t think everyone could take the time off, but I can say Clint and I would be all for it.”

There’s a moment’s pause, Tony and Bucky glancing at one another, “alright, fine, you win. I’ll contact the volunteers and medical teams, I’ll see how many agree to the trip and get back to you once I have an answer.”

Tony punches the air once the call disconnects, grinning at Bucky, “thanks for convincing mom.”

“Anytime, so long as I get an extra cookie.”

“Duh! How else do you think I keep around my cabal of evil geniuses?” Tony snorts, grinning at the taller brunet, turning to give Bucky his full attention and view of his sinew arms fold over his chest, “how’s the arm treating you?”

“Like a fuckin’ dream.”

“Did Steve finish up the artwork?” Tony asks, turning back to his worktable, pulling up the holographic blueprints of Bucky’s arm.

“Yeah, he did,” Bucky answers, pulling out his phone to show Tony. “He worked on them until we got them just right, he designed a majority our tattoos, so honestly I just needed to give the final green light after a few adjustments for the new ones.”

Tony takes the offered device and stares at the screen, grinning, “okay first, I need to get you a
StarkPhone, because iPhones are so never ago, and mind sending me these? I’ll have JARV work on printing them on the arm, it won’t take more than a few minutes, and it’ll give me the time I need to make the last few adjustments. Also, you have other tattoos?

Bucky grins, leering at Tony is a clownish way while wiggling his brows, “wouldn’t you like to know?”

“You’re horrible,” Tony pouts, fighting off his own grin, “I love it.”

The duo laugh for a moment, before Bucky gets started on Tony’s request of sending him the photos, and asks conversationally, “so how’s it coming with the gala?”

“Well aside from Pepper nearly ripping her hair out? We’re on track,” Tony answers, eyes focused on the holograms around him, clever hands working away with practiced ease - Bucky doesn’t bother hiding the way he watches the man work. “In a few months we should be ready to herd you all together and make you pout for the cameras - hopefully in Monaco - once everyone’s fully healed, or at least used to their new prosthetics, do the gala shit, and soon after all that we can finally get the prosthetics out to the world. Though the board is giving me and Pepper shit for trying to push for the prosthetics being sold at cost-”

Bucky stills at that, “you’re going to sell the prosthetics at cost?”

Tony turns his head to cast Bucky a glance - as though it was an obvious fact - and nods, before looking back at his work, “well that’s the compromise and, honestly, worst case scenario. I want to push for the older models to be sold at the current market prices so more people have access to them without putting themselves in debt, and since we’re still pushing that vets get them for free, we’re gearing up for pushback. But with the success and profits the company’s getting from green energy and technology projects, like the StarkPhones and tablets, we’re hoping we can convince the board before the gala.”

Bucky swallows thickly, glancing down at his left hand and flexes the sleek metal appendage, the plates silently whirring and following the minute command with ease and knows these prosthetics can’t be cheap; to sell the prosthetics at cost? At market prices? To have vets get them free? It was almost dizzying, but the unmistakable fondness Bucky felt for Tony somehow doubles in his chest right then, how was this man even real? He was fighting on behalf of people he’d never met before this project - nor was likely to ever meet - to help them get their lives back in any way he could, without so much as wanting a thank you in return. Bucky’s throat works slowly, blinking back the stinging in his eyes; how had he ever thought Tony was a selfish man anymore? Sure, there was no denying who he was in the past, but now? It was surreal to think the Tony Stark that flaunted himself around clubs and gossip rags was the same man standing in front of him.

Tony glances over to Bucky, “help me with the placement?”

Bucky moves to stands beside Tony, the two working on the best placements for the full sleeve Steve had designed for Bucky’s prosthetic, and the brunet can’t help but feel how close he is to Tony - can almost feel the heat radiating off the smaller man. He wants to reach out his arm, hold the older man to his side like he had done that night in Tony’s penthouse, and it’s only because Tony needs his help with the tattoos that Bucky manages to keep his hands to himself. However, that doesn’t stop him from glancing at Tony every so often, the exposed expanse of new skin making his fingers - prosthetic and otherwise - itching to touch him. Curious if Tony’s muscles are just for show, but given the amount of times he’s walked in to see Tony working away at his inventions, knows the muscles are built for manual labor and function - and doesn’t that just make Bucky’s urge to run his hands along the planes of Tony’s body all the more hard to ignore?
Tony Stark was an attractive man, there was no denying that; the world even knew it because there hadn’t been a year since puberty that the man wasn’t ranked somewhere on some list of ‘Hottest Influential Figures’ - Bucky may or may not have creeped the internet a bit in regards to the man beside him to figure out that tad-bit of information, but how could he not? (In the process he’d also discovered that, apparently, he and ‘grunge phase Tony’ would have been best friends…yeah, the internet was an interesting place).

Despite his initial ire towards Tony, 'lust at first sight’ would have been an apt description of what Bucky felt coursing through him upon first laying eyes on the genius, only adding to his initial misunderstood ‘hate’ towards the man; sure, there had been anger there, but looking back it was never hate. And now, standing close enough to touch him, Bucky found himself clamping down on the urge every few minutes. Bucky wondered what Tony would feel like against him, under him, and bit back a groan at the thought of the genius splayed out on bedsheets for Bucky and Bucky alone. Lord this can't be healthy, Bucky thinks to himself, feeling slightly guilty at the dirty thoughts of Tony swirling around in his mind with the man right there next to him. That said, Bucky was slightly proud of himself for not jumping out of his skin when a shoulder brushes against his own, and looks over to Tony.

“We’re all set, you ready?”

Bucky nods, despite knowing having to go - even just a few minutes - without the prosthetic would be a jarring experience, but he trusted Tony. During their time apart, Bucky had time to analyze everything he’d felt towards the engineer, and finally standing at his side after so long apart made Bucky feel as though he could breathe again. It was a feeling he wouldn’t - couldn’t - allow himself to dwell on, further than admitting he was almost pathetically attracted to Tony, anyway. But it was still nice, being able to talk to Tony again, and seeing that the man appeared more relaxed around Bucky gave him the courage to - maybe - keep their correspondence going. Tony had already done so much for Bucky, surely he’d be okay to step out of his busy schedule for some coffee, right? (He manages it with Bucky’s friends after all, and yes, maybe he is a little bitter about that, so sue him.) ‘You’ll never know if you don’t try, James’, Charles is smooth accented voice resonates in his head, a familiar phrase the therapist seemed to say at least once every session, and maybe…maybe the damn giggly man was right - he had been about everything else so far. Before Tony can turn away from him, Bucky grabs hold of the man’s wrist, meeting his questioning gaze head on - knowing he had to speak the words now, lest he lose his nerve later.

“Tony, I…I can’t even begin, but thank y-” the singer’s words die on his tongue when Tony holds up his other hand, his relaxed demeanor going rigid within seconds, all of it effectively silencing Bucky.

“Please, it’s the least I can do for you, after all… it was my weapons that…” Tony trails gently removing his wrist from Bucky’s grip, throat and jaw working but nothing seems to be right enough to say, instead he sighs and runs a hand through his already mussed hair. “It’s the least I can do, okay? So please, don’t thank me.”

Bucky would swear he hears ‘I don’t deserve it’ as Tony turns away, he can’t be certain, but his smile drops all the same. Bucky watches as Tony pulls up a new holographic screen, and notices the way his eyes seem to go distant, the way Tony’s shoulders hunch; Bucky recognizes it all immediately because it was - is - a look Steve has on his face more often than Bucky would like - a look he finds on his own face some mornings. Bucky walks closer to the engineer, closing the distance between them once more, and goes unnoticed until he touches the man’s partially bare shoulder, making Tony flinch and snap his attention back to him.

“Thank you, Tony,” Bucky says firmly, immediately hating the way Tony’s expression turns into
one of self-loathing, mouth parting to undoubtedly argue, but Bucky won’t have it. Bucky doesn’t know why he needs Tony to understand and accept his gratitude, but he just does. “No, you don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t be grateful for. Yes, it was your weapons that resulted in me losing my arm,” Tony flinches, and Bucky fists his hands at his sides to keep himself from wrapping his arms around the man.

“But you’re also the reason I have my arm back,” Bucky continues, undeterred. “I’ve seen people do unforgivable things for the sake of wealth, but here you are, trying to fix things when, honestly, no one ever asked or even expected you to. Tony, you’re holding yourself up to a new standard, and I respect that, I do. I know about your past, or at least what’s been made public, but unlike so many money mongering fucks, you decided to do good for the world; you chose to do good. You chose to give me and so many other people another chance at life, so don’t you dare tell me I can’t thank you for that, because I can and I damn well will.”

Tony’s bewilderment at Bucky’s speech is blatant, he fights down the heat he feels creeping up his neck at the way Tony openly stares up at him, and suddenly Bucky’s all too aware of close they are but can’t find it in himself to step back. Midwinter eyes lock with Tony’s dark whirlpools, almost like one is daring the other to blink first, but neither seem able - or willing - to break this…this moment. Though Bucky’s eyes do soon wander without his permission, glancing down at Tony’s mouth Bucky wonders if they’re as soft as they look, he almost gives into his screaming desire to just lean in, but something else catches his eye; just under the collar of Tony’s tank top, Bucky sees…black lines? His eyes are drawn to them, curiosity almost making him reach out to tug Tony’s tank down enough to properly see. However, Tony catches Bucky’s line of site and suddenly whips around, marching over to snatch up a crewneck shirt from the couch and yank it on, leaving Bucky to stand there confused and brimming with questions as to what he’d seen.

Whatever ‘moment’ they’d had was long gone, broken because of Bucky’s stupidity, fucking damnit! Before Bucky can utter a word, maybe try to address what had just happened between them, Tony clears his throat and turns back to face him with a smile - the expanse of skin Bucky had been aching to touch now hidden beneath long sleeves.

“Let’s get started?” Bucky knows Tony’s words for the topic change they are, and for once doesn’t fight him.

The musician knows Tony still hadn’t properly accepted his thanks, but at least he’d stopped refusing it, so Bucky relents and takes what he can get. Moving to the same chair Tony had him sit on when he’d fitted the prosthetic onto him the first time, Bucky braces himself for the removal of his arm, and once again finds himself trying to convince his heart that Tony’s smile wasn’t as fake as it felt.

With the date of his birthday drawing closer, and the palladium poisoning making itself even harder to ignore with each passing day, Tony feels - despite his efforts to leave a positive mark on the world - hollow. Unfulfilled. Sleepless eyes stare up at the ceiling of his bedroom, despite the darkness and - almost eerie - silence, he just can’t fucking sleep; the absence of distractions only propelling Tony further into his thoughts. Bucky’s words still left a…strange - there really was no other way to describe it - feeling in Tony’s chest, and for the first time Tony damned his eidetic memory - he hadn’t even done that the time he’d accidentally walked in on his parents doing The Nasty as a kid, though to be fair he couldn’t look either of them in the eye for about a month after the fact. However, it would be a lie to say the musician wasn’t on his mind a lot lately, since their first meeting really, and his speech in Tony’s lab earlier that week still rattled around his brain like loose change in a tin can.
The brunet tosses onto his side, screwing his eyes shut until he sees static and his burning eyes and temples ache, but even through the generated phosphenes and light Tony still sees Bucky’s face. He could still see the way the younger man had stared at Tony with such sincerity in his eyes and voice, it was a surprise Tony’s heart didn’t somehow fall to his feet right then and there, and wasn’t that a thought? Tony couldn’t understand how the man seemed to have believed everything he’d been spewing; Tony was the reason he’d lost his arm, and yet he was still so unrelenting in making sure Tony accepted his thanks - a full-fledged goddamn thank you; no one thanked Tony. Ever. His friend, Steve, is not-so-subtle irritation towards Tony (though lessened now as it may be) was far more understandable than Bucky’s behavior towards him, and hell after just reading the man’s file Tony had fully expected Barnes to have spat in his face during their first meeting; but no, the crazy fucker thanked him, how messed up was that?

Then again, Barnes did express his hatred for Tony, at least at first. Every other comment or answer held a biting ire to it, Tony had fully understood and accepted it, knowing he deserved far more than the simple snide words from the man. But then Bucky suddenly pulled a one-eighty, he became far too damn kind to Tony - far more kind than he deserved. What had changed, though? At first he thought it had something to do with Tiberius’s appearance, but upon closer inspection Barnes is kindness towards Tony began just before that; it had been just after, he thinks, when I’d left Clint and Bucky to change the reactor chip. It couldn’t have been for more than a few minutes, and what the hell could happen in a few minutes, that lead to Barnes suddenly having an entire attitude change towards him? The engineer picks up his phone from his bedside table, fingers moving without real thought, at least not until he’s staring at the very first message he’d gotten from Barnes; it had been on the night Stone had shown up.

**James Barnes - January 20th, 1:32AM: Tony are you okay?**

Tony had given each volunteer his contact information since he was heading this project before mass production, and wanted to keep a close eye on each volunteer until then, for various reasons. He’d expected to be texted a few times at odd hours by the volunteers, it came with the territory after all, but what he hadn’t been expecting was Bucky to text him so much - especially this last week, much to Tony’s surprise (and genuine confusion). It had been innocuous little questions at first, things many of the volunteers would have asked him too (the arm’s waterproof right?), but seemed to get a little more teasing as the days wore on (I told Steve my fingers vibrate, he believed it, and just about choked to death on his pasta. It’s coming out of his nose, Nat says ur her best friend now), and Tony being Tony he couldn’t pass up easy openings for banter.

Tony flirted as easily has he breathed long before his abduction, but it never seemed to deter Bucky, the man always giving back just as good as he got, and with every notification Tony found himself grinning like a damned fiend, but how could he not? The man was charming, sarcastic and whip-smart, witty and damn sinful levels of handsome. The more Tony got to know Bucky, the more he felt drawn to the man, and couldn’t deny he enjoyed talking to Bucky far more than he probably should; Bucky? Since when have you started thinking of him as ‘Bucky’? Tony wonders, because the formality - the distance - of using his last name offered seemed to be lessening now, and Tony didn’t know if that was a good thing.

Stark fully admits to himself that Barnes would have been someone he wouldn’t have hesitated to roll around in the hay with, but since the cave, Tony never even took his shirt off around other people - least to say, he and his hands haven’t been this closely acquainted since he was a horny tween who discovered what an orgasm was. It was pathetic, really, but what else was there? Tony and Tiberius had split up a few months before his kidnapping in Afghanistan - though now, Tony fully admits it was something he should have done far sooner, especially with the reminder of why being made blatantly clear the night Stone showed up at his house unannounced. And just the
thought of someone seeing the arc reactor embedded in his scarred chest, the possible risk of having them go public with the information, to have the world know about the ‘aim here’ bullseye in his chest made something cold and sickening sit heavy in Tony’s stomach. It didn’t help that his chest wasn’t a pretty site, by any means, and Tony knew with a sobering level of certainty that even someone as gorgeous and - honestly, stupidly - kind as Barnes wouldn’t be that understanding. He could always feel Bucky’s eyes on him during their time together in the workshop, and as much as Tony wanted to just say ‘fuck it’ - especially after their moment together a week ago - and give in to the urge to just kiss and fuck the guy already, he knew it wasn’t a possibility.

Tony knew he was still attractive, was self-centered enough not to downplay the blessings he’d been given thanks to his good genetics, and Bucky was...different. There was no denying it, in only the sparse number of times they’ve seen each other, Tony found himself drawn to Bucky in a way he’d never felt with someone before. However, like always, Tony tries clamping down on that feeling; grips it tight in his fist and refuses to release it until it dies, because the close call with Bucky having almost seen the webbings spreading from his arc reactor had been a sobering wake up call, and he couldn’t risk anyone finding out. Tony’s life had always been in the public eye, from his first steps to his first goddamn kiss; nothing in Tony’s life had ever truly been private, so was it really so much to ask that at the very least his death not be yet another thing the public took away from him?

Tony nearly jumps when his phone buzzes in his hands (no matter how light Stark tech was, a phone to the face was never fun), the screen lighting up with Bucky’s name, and the genius feels a pavlovian smile stretch across his lips as his stomach warmly turns on itself, is this that feeling of ‘butterflies’ people always talk about?

James Barnes - Today, 10:01PM: what’s up, chicken butt?

You - Today, 10:02PM: Nothing much, bored, you?

James Barnes - Today, 10:02PM: samesies

James Barnes - Today, 10:02PM: but speaking of bored, I wanna play a prank on Stevie and I need ur help

You - Today, 10:03PM: Ooooohhhhhhh does this mean I'm in your super secret boy band?

James Barnes - Today, 10:03PM: totes ;D

James Barnes - Today, 10:04PM: Okay, so here’s what I was thinkin…

Tony can’t wipe the grin off his face for the life of him as he reads the barrage of texts from Bucky, each idea sounding more ridiculous than the last - no, Bucky, Veet in his shampoo will lead to first degree murder, trust me Happy had to wrestle Rhodey off me last time - and loves every single one of them, even jumping in with his own tweaks and suggestions - much to Bucky’s apparent delight. However, it’s right then, as he’s laughing at the outpouring of juvenile ideas, that Tony suddenly stills, his smile faltering and laugh tapering off; he likes Bucky…likes him far more than he should, and knew that was a dangerous road to go down, especially now. Tony, you’re dying, you can’t fall into this, his mind growls, and Tony grits his teeth, because - as much as he hated to admit it, hated to admit his mortality to himself yet again - he couldn’t do this. Couldn’t let himself fall for Bucky - no, Barnes - when he was nearing the end of, well…everything. Throwing the silk sheets off himself, Tony moves to get changed, JARVIS helpfully turning on the lights for him to see as he stalks around his room.

“JARVIS, tell Thor to get a car ready,” Tony grates out, yanking off his tank top and snatches up a
thicker shirt - one that properly conceals the pale glow of the arc reactor, that hides the webbings that lead up to his collar bones now, and thus would be more suitable for tonight’s plans.

“Mr. Odinson will be ready within five minutes,” the AI answers seconds later, and Tony is grateful to the latest addition in his security detail, Thor was a loyal and discreet guy - not to mention built like brick shithouse, which helped when he was acting as Tony’s security detail. “May I ask what you’re planning on doing, Sir?”

Tony swallows, trying to shake the thoughts of Barnes from his mind - he couldn’t think of him as Bucky anymore, it felt too personal. Let him get too attached.

The mechanic rubs his palm against the arc reactor, and meets his gaze in the dresser mirror, “something stupid.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone SO MUCH for staying with me on this crazy ride between our boys! I LOVE reading your comments, they really do make writing this story all the more enjoyable, so thank y’all so much again and I'll see you next time!! xxoxoo
Not My Usual Saturday Night

Chapter Summary

Tony's night doesn't go as planned.

Chapter Notes

Some smut and violence ahead!
Fair warning, it's not between who you might want it to be, but don't worry
Bucky/Tony IS the endgame here...and that was accidental wording, but still true haha!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It isn’t ideal by any means, he was one candid shot or unseen security camera away from ending up on TMZ (with Pepper and Jeri tearing him a new one), again, but Tony needed this - his body’s demands were getting to the point of nearly suffocating him, more so as of late, but we won’t start on that. So he did what he always did; he fell back into old habits. Tony groans as he clutched at the shirt of the nameless man who attacks his neck (he didn’t like marks, but what was more to add to the litany that were now scattered across his body?), back pressed firmly against the grimy club’s bathroom door, and rocks his hips forward. Tony's head thumps back against the door, relishing in the feeling of the stranger’s hands on him, well built body crowding the shorter man who clutches at the strawberry blond’s hair and pulls him in for another sloppy kiss - Tony can’t help but wish that this man’s eyes were the color of diamonds. Forget about Barnes, Stark, his mind scolds, and by God does he try, but it really isn’t his fault he can’t control his fantasies.

Coming to a club to get laid was reckless, granted, but not unexpected - at least this way Tony didn’t have to make up an excuse as to why he wouldn’t take his shirt off. The stranger presses the hard lines of his body against Tony’s and the genius only just manages to hold back the moan that threatens to tear past his lips, hands moving to scramble at the man - Pete Quinn? Quilt? Ugh, close enough - is fly, working the man’s skinny jeans open before falling to his knees, and the sharp pain that surges up Tony’s thighs makes him shiver - fuck he missed this. The clubber leans against the wall of the stall to steady himself, a large hand immediately going into Tony’s hair - while the other steadies him against the opposite wall - and grips, perhaps a touch harsher than most would prefer but Tony moans aloud this time, unbidden- yeah, Tony really, really missed this. The man scrambles for a condom from his wallet, taking the proffered condom. Tony wasn’t new to this by any means, and even if he was dying, he’d be damned if he wasn’t doing this with style; opening the foil packet Tony places the rubber on the flushed tip of the man’s dick, before rolling the condom down with his mouth, and that moan right there? That is why Tony loves being on the giving end, fuck generosity, Tony was as selfish as they came and that sound was his reward.

“Look at you,” Bulky and Handsome shakily whispers, chest working the air in and out of his lungs in small gasps, hand fisting a little tighter in his hair. “Fuckin’ gorgeous.”

The praise washes over Tony like a warm caress, his own cock jumping in the confines of his jeans, reaching for his crotch he gives his length a squeeze as he leans up to lick a stripe up the underside of
the man’s length. The stranger’s head falls back, teeth digging into his lower lip and Tony slowly sucks him into his mouth, hoping to tease the man enough to just take. The engineer uses his free hand to work his own pants open, taking his aching cock into a trembling fist, mimicking his movements to the tempo of his mouth and right hand on the stranger. His pacing slowly grows quicker, relishing in the few moments the man loses himself enough to thrust into Tony’s mouth, the genius ignores his muttered apologies, preferring to ride the high of having his mouth used - even if only slightly.

Tony’s mind gets away from him, and without his permission he imagines looking up, and seeing Bucky staring down at him with lust-blown steel eyes; the thought alone is enough to have Tony clutching at Tony’s hair, not a stranger’s. He pictures Bucky pinning him on his cock, cutting off Tony’s air supply as he fucks his throat, chasing his own release as Tony takes it.

Tony only just registers the man’s stuttering hips, mouth protected by the warmth that would have otherwise flooded it, and works himself over the edge soon after. The man doesn’t give Tony exactly what he wants, but he gives Tony enough to sate him. Tony leans over to snatch up a fistful of tissues to clean himself up, offering a clean batch for the man to do the same, and tries clearing Barnes from his mind - it was just a fantasy, everyone gets carried away with their little daydreams; it didn’t mean anything. Wiping himself clean, Stark tucks himself away and stands, buttoning up his jeans as the man - fuck, he really never did learn his name - does the same; the duo meet eyes for a moment before chuckling in slight awkward embarrassment.

“Thanks man…” flushed face darkening in the dimly lit bathroom stall, “mint?”

That’s all it takes for Tony to lose his shit and start cackling, the strawberry blond hunk inches away from him soon joining in, but Tony takes the offered sweet from the man’s Burgundy jacket, “nice jacket.”

Tony wasn’t ever really one for post-quickie chats with the people he hooked up with, but the guy was nice enough to offer him a mint when he could have just as easily fucked off without a single word.

“Thanks! You’d be surprised what you can find in second hand stores,” he chuckles, popping a candy into his own mouth, “oh, I’m Peter Quill, by the way. Pretty sure I heard you call me ‘Quilt’ at some point.”

Tony expects him to be ticked off, but the grin on Peter’s is open and playful, insuring Tony he’s just messing with him, “Tony Stark.”

There’s a moment of pause, and Tony feels like he may have messed up, when the man snorts, “oh thank fuck, I thought I was losing it! You said your name was Tony, but I couldn’t be sure, given the lighting in here is…well, shit.”

Tony grins, “maybe we outta get outta here before someone pounds on the door, hm?”

Peter nods, following Tony out of the stall, the duo fall into a companionable chatter for a few moments as they wash their hands (Peter was actually pretty funny, and had the circumstances been different, maybe they could have been friends), Peter thanks Tony once again for a good time but pauses at the lavatory door, “hey, um…I know this may not be any of my business, but…pretty sure
you called out someone’s name, somewhere in there…maybe give that person a call? I think, I dunno, I could be talkin’ out of my ass here, but I know it’s like leaving something unresolved and…it sucks, you deserve better than that, Mr. Stark.”

“Tony, please, I just sucked you off after all,” the response it automatic, but the words catch him off guard, Peter chuckles and nods.

“Thanks again for the fun time, Tony,” waving a little salute at the engineer, he grins boyishly playful, “I hope you have a good night.”

Tony stares after Peter as he exists the restroom, slightly dumbfounded that he’d just been given some - rather kind, actually - advice from a near perfect stranger he’d sucked off a couple minutes ago. Well, is all Tony can think, that was unexpected, but chuckles softly; Peter was clearly a sweet guy, and Tony wished him well - he was lucky, that Quill was a nice guy and not some prick, dealing with the aftermath of bullies was never fun. Stark sighs, turning to look himself in the mirror, for all of Peter’s good intentions with his advice, it wasn’t that easy - not by a long shot. First off, he was dying, and Tony would like to think he wasn’t such an asshole that he’d drag someone into that particular kind of hell. Glancing up at himself in the mirror, Tony takes in his appearance; mussed hair and wrinkled clothes, it wasn’t too obvious that he’d just blown a complete stranger (well, semi-stranger), and given that he was at a club, his appearance made all the more sense.

His body ached and whined with the need to be held; this was the part he was really worried about tonight, the fall after the high. Despite what some may believe, Tony adored physical contact, but since his kidnapping he’d held everyone at arm’s length, and the few quickies he’d gotten from strangers in coat closets at functions; in the bathroom stalls of clubs or soirées, always left him feeling a little bit colder after, and each time he wonders if the high is really worth the crash that was always soon to follow despite his best efforts - this time was, clearly, no different.

“Got any more bad ideas?” He asks his reflection, himself, and shakes his head about to call it a night when his phone buzzes in his back pocket.

Reaching for the device he expects to see Thor’s name, but of course it wouldn’t be that easy. However, Tony decides to indulge himself - he was alone, after all, and Peter’s words were still lingering in his head - and allows himself to grin down at the device’s screen, warmth pooling in his chest as Bucky’s name winks back at him.

James Barnes - 12:12AM: STEVIE AND SAM WENT OUT TO GET US DINNER AND I’M TOTALLY ABOUT TO SARAN WRAP HIS TOILET!!!

James Barnes - 12:13AM: thanx for the idea ;D

You - 12:15AM: I live to serve ;D

Tony’s response is sent before he can actually register the words he’d typed out, and stills in horror. WHAT THE FUCK, TONY?! his mind screeches, cursing himself for the way the words would come off; flirty was one thing, but this? This was far too close to Tony’s sexual proclivities for comfort. Tony stares at his phone, heart in his throat, his mouth suddenly dry when no reply comes through despite the message having been read; Tony tucks his phone away before he can make an even bigger ass of himself, great, now he thinks I’m a fucking freak. Groaning, Tony rubs at his eyes until he sees static, time to call it a fuckin’ night. Pushing past the bathroom’s door and back into the throng of clubbers, Tony is immediately deafened by the bass-heavy music that engulfs him, but is silently thankful for the few moments he can’t hear his thoughts. Working his way through the crowd, Tony mutters apologies whenever he knocks into someone but doesn’t stop, wanting to just
get out of the stuffy environment that had seemed so much more enjoyable earlier that night.

Practically stumbling out of the club, Tony immediately drinks in the crisp New York night air around him, and scans around for a cab. Upon finding none Tony begins to walk further down the darkened street (silently regretting telling Thor to take the night off), and pulls his phone out once again despite his logic’s protests, needing to know if Barnes replied or not, wondering if - by hopes of all hopes - he took Tony’s words as a joke. His phone’s notifications remain jarringly nonexistent, and Tony feels his stomach plummet even further, his steps faltering for just a fraction of a second as his heart twists. Maybe it’s Tony’s anxiety that leaves him so off guard, enough that he doesn’t see it coming - in any sense - when an iron pipe connects with his side; the hit immediately knocking the wind out of him. Tony stumbles, dropping his phone and is suddenly shaking with adrenaline as he whips around to face his attacker, and is met with a sallow looking man - no more than Tony’s age, if he tried to guess. The man, likely doped up or drunk, fidgets in place as he glares at Tony with dark red-rimmed eyes, and Tony knows the drill well enough to know what he’s about to ask.

“Gi’me me your wallet!” The attacker demands, words slightly slurred and Tony keeps himself from making a sarcastic comment, deciding to just do as told and have him arrested later.

“Alright, Trainspotting,” Tony immediately acquiesces (so much for jokes, but he was fucking nervous, alright?), trying to placate the man with an outstretched hand, “ alright just...just stay calm.”

Just as Tony reaches into his back pocket for his wallet, the man jumps him, and suddenly Tony’s pretty sure his earlier assumption of him being drugged up was - unfortunately - correct. The man isn’t that strong, Tony easily blocks and strikes back when he can with fluid movements he’d learned in the gym with Thor and Happy, but it’s because of the surprise of the attack that Tony tastes pennies on his tongue. He tries reasoning with he man, tries shoving him off as he blocks another hit, that he can just take his damned wallet but the man says nothing - Tony wonders if he even hears him.

Tony would much rather end this without lasting damage to either party, but it’s when the man lands another hit, this time jarringly - terrifyingly - close to the center of his chest, that Tony truly panics. Logically, Tony knew the arc reactor was more than capable of withstanding a simple punch from an uncoordinated druggie - but that didn’t mean Tony wanted to test the theory out, despite his ever present genius curiosity - and started to fight harder against the man. He faintly hears the scrape of the iron pipe on the pavement, tries desperately to throw the man off him as he raises the metal rod above his head, and Tony’s only thought as he raised his arms over his face is of Barnes - why? Tony couldn’t give an answer even under the threat of death, and yes, he sees the blatant irony.

Tony expects the metal to clash with his forearms, knowing they’d likely break, but after a moment he feels...nothing, well, actually he suddenly feels lighter.

He can breathe again.

“GET OFF ME!” He hears the mugger yell, the sound slightly distant in his ringing ears, and Tony turns his head to the side to see the man pinned down by a larger figure.

“Hey man, think can you stand?” Tony doesn’t mean to, but he flinches at the unexpected voice at his other side, and is met by a crouching young man with a hand held out.

Tony swallows thickly and nods, taking the offered hand as the stranger slowly helps him back into his feet. The engineer immediately hisses as he clutches at the shirt over his tender side where the metal rod had first struck him, fractured, he thinks, but hoping to the ever loving fuck he’s wrong - Pepper would probably kill him if he looked beat up during his birthday. Their attention quickly snaps over to where the second man had tackled the druggie off of Tony, the clatter of the iron pipe
followed by retreating footsteps as the attacker runs away, and a tall blond sighs before turning towards the duo.

“I'm sorry, I tried holding him down but he was a squirmy fucker,” the man, no, wait, Tony knows this guy- Rogers?

“Stark?” Rogers looks immediately perplexed, no doubt confused as to why the engineer was in a dark no name street of New York. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Tony chuckles weakly and shrugs the shoulder of his undamaged side, looking over at the other man, and now realizes the stranger that had helped him was actually Sam, and turns back to Rogers; he wants to make a quip, a witty comment to diffuse all this, but…the adrenaline crash hitting him full force now that he’s out of danger. I'm so fucking tired, is all Tony can think, and by the way Sam’s arm secures itself around him the man must sense it too, and Tony unashamedly leans against the man’s side as he sways dangerously on his feet.

“Went out,” just breathe Tony, my hands are shaking…they’ve been doing that a lot lately, “was hoping to have a bit of fun before getting back into the thick of things, y’know.”

Tony knew it was likely because of the crashing of adrenaline mixed in with his earlier feelings of cold loneliness in the club’s bathroom, but he can’t fight the way his head ducks, nor the feeling of uncomfortable - near painful - coiling in his chest; he’d never admit to wanting it, but in that moment he craved Steve and Sam’s kindness (the one that seemed to hover around their friend group like something tangible), or at the very least, something that wasn’t disdain. Though the man had hated Tony’s guts upon their first meeting, and for good reason, that knowledge didn’t make it any easier to swallow - things had gotten better between them, but Tony suspected why even with their little group coffee dates, and his theory was that it was because Steve knew he was dying. Steve seemed like too good of a man to kick someone when they were down, and Tony was selfishly grateful for that.

Tony felt weak and pathetic for wanting them - for lack of a better term - ‘to be nice to him’, like they were children on a playground; he’s a genius, an inventor and billionaire; Tony had survived a damn kidnapping, and fought for his freedom from strangers that ripped his chest open for fuck’s sake! Yet here he was, limp and trembling in the arms of people who he only really knew by their coffee orders, about to cry and whine ‘please don’t be mean to me, I can’t take it right now’ like a kid who’d just been pushed in the mud. Just…just let me go home, he wants to say, but…Tony didn’t know if he could handle this alone right now, but that’s the way he’d always done things; wasn’t tonight supposed to be about falling back on old habits? Is all he can think to himself, but I just…I don’t want to be alone anymore, and despite his two warring sides - despite his visceral want - Tony couldn’t bring himself to ask, and instead tentatively meets Steve - basically another stranger, albeit one who knew his secret - is gaze for only a few seconds at a time. I seem to be having a theme with strangers tonight, Tony thinks with a weak level of amusement, and tries to force himself to relax.

Only one out of four tried to kill you, his mind weakly muses, you’ve had worse odds before.

He was better than this, stronger, because all his life Tony had no other choice; he couldn’t let them see him weak, not when these days would were nearing his last - he refused to be remembered as a weak man, not after everything. Tony tries pulling away from the Sam who helpfully held him steady, flashing him some semblance - an undoubtedly bloody and pathetic excuse - of a smile, and attempts to work up the courage to face Steve’s gaze. However, just as Tony’s whiskey eyes scan the floor for his phone, he notices the dropped bags of take out, suddenly remembering his conversation with Barnes and breathes a curse; he’s scrambling for the food, his body screaming in
protest, before he can think better of it.

“Shit,” Tony groans, looking into the bags; the styrofoam boxes were a little banged up, but thankfully the food - somehow - hadn’t spilt before holding the bags out for Steve to take, finally meeting the man’s eyes.

“You’ll be late for dinner,” he says, compelled to add, “Bucky told me, swear I wasn’t creepin’ on you, Rogers. Though...as a thanks for saving my ass, be careful when you go to use the restroom; Bucky’s a little shit.”

Steve’s gaze is considering and...maybe even a little fond (what the hell?), Tony isn’t sure why, until the man sighs and shakes his head, “Stark don’t be a dunce, I’m not letting you go home by yourself after all that, you’re comin’ with us.”

Tony wants to argue, wants to weasel his way out of the offer and simply go home; wants to be alone in his penthouse to lick his wounds and drown his shame in a bottle. However, the relief he feels is almost visceral; besides, Steve’s expression and tone brooked no arguments, so he relents, and follows the two men trying his best not to limp - Tony had happily walked funny in the past before, but usually those times weren’t because of a likely twisted ankle. Sam doesn’t hesitate to carefully wrap his arm back under Tony’s arm to help him walk, he wants to snap out that he’s fine, but then Wilson smiles at him, it’s almost painfully clear that there’s no judgment or pity there, so, once again Tony bites back his pride.

“I’m assuming your middle name is ‘Mama Bear’?” the engineer tries for levity, despite the way his vision spins slightly, as they make their way down the street.

“Some days,” the Sam chuckles, nodding over at Steve - who scoops up Tony’s phone and hands it back to Tony - as he continues, “though it’s normally Steve who goes by that title; it’s actually ‘Thomas’.”

“Well, the more you know, thanks Sam...really,” Tony smiles kindly, knowing this man had no horse in this race and yet still chose to help, and waves a hand. “Fun fact about me, I’ve never been mugged before.”

Wilson turns to raise a brow at Tony, expression dramatically confused, “wait, so this isn’t a normal Saturday night for you?”

Tony can’t help it, he suddenly finds himself laughing despite his body’s protests, and doesn’t bother stifling the sound even when Rogers looks over at the duo with a raised brow; it’s the first time he’d laughed all night, and he’d relish in the feeling, and appreciates it when Steve chuckles along with them - maybe Steve really didn’t hate him (not anymore, anyway), and something about that thought has Tony smiling the entire way back to their apartment, split lip be damned.

Chapter End Notes

*Hides behind trashcans* I know I'm horrible, but I swear Tony will be treated better heh.... That said, thank you to EVERYONE who commented, your thoughts on this story mean SO much to me and I love, love, LOVE hearing from all of you! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and poor Tony!
Missed Chances

Chapter Summary

Bucky keeps missing his chance.

Chapter Notes

Warning for the aftermath of Tony's mugging!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky stares down at his phone, stomach twisting in a not-so-unpleasant way as he rereads the pixilated words yet again.

Tony Stark - 12:15AM: I live to serve ;D

Bucky had been staring at the words on and off again (okay, no, more like on and I-swear-I'm-not-watching-my-phone-and-leaping-on-it-every-time-it-rings-even-though-I-totally-am) for a good hour, each time typing out and deleting a response like a broken record, because he’s clearly kidding, Barnes, get your head out of the damn gutter. Sure, it was no secret by this point Bucky and Tony flirted pretty heavily in their bantering, and even in their few emotional or odd thoughtful conversations, both men always held a level of...something in their tone since Bucky had kicked off their text conversations after That Day (as he’d dubbed it in his head, when he’d all but strong-armed the man into accepting his thanks) in Tony’s lab. Their contact was a comforting constant in Bucky’s daily routine now, each time he felt his phone buzzing he’d grin, eagerly reading Tony’s responses - or pout when it wasn’t Tony. However, this? This felt like...something else, and Bucky honestly didn’t know where to even begin to approach the topic; if Stark was kidding and he didn’t respond in-kind, then hello awkward, but what if Tony was serious?

The response had been immediate from the engineer, Bucky had to read the replay over twice to make sure his mind hadn’t been playing tricks on him, and when he got his confirmation, lord did his mind get away from him. Holyfuckingshit, was his first thought because ‘I live to serve’ didn’t leave much vague in way of imagery (it was right there next to phrases like ‘make me’), and Bucky’s mind had more than happily supplied the musician with more than he could really keep up with; the words ringing in his head with fantasies that would make porn stars blush, Bucky, springing a hard on is not going to be fun to explain once Steve and Sam, logic reprimands, but fuck could he really be blamed? Just the thought of Tony beneath him, moaning and gasping, of begging Bucky for release-shit, he cuts his own thoughts off with a groan, screwing his eyes shut. Bucky palms at his crotch and breathes shakily, willing his half-mast boner down while he still could, because he must have been overthinking this, right?

But...why hadn’t Tony followed it up with anything?

Well it’s too fuckin’ late to answer now, you jackass, Bucky internally grumbles, glaring at the time on his phone - 1:23AM. Joke or not, the moment’s over and you might have missed your chance.
“Fuck it, just...say something, Barnes!” Bucky hisses to himself in the empty apartment, determinedly tapping out an answer, but feels his chest seize in relief when he hears the front door unlocking and quickly hides away his phone.

*Saved by the bell,* Bucky thinks and sighs heavily, scrubbing a hand down his face - he doesn’t know whether he should feel relieved or not.

“Stevie you’re out of saran wra- what the fuck?!” Bucky’s on his feet and barrels to the front door before he even registers standing, his hands immediately cupping Tony’s bloodied face as gently as he can. “What happened? What the *fuck* happened?!” He demands of his friends as his eyes ping-pong between the trio; he doesn’t mean for his voice to hold such a biting edge, but his mind immediately floods with thoughts of Tiberius Stone and Tony’s bruised jaw - the rage he feels welling up behind his breastbone is almost dizzying.

Bucky doesn’t hesitate to help in Sam usher Tony into the guest bathroom while Steve darts into the kitchen, gently setting the man down on toilet, and hovers over him like a mother hen while Sam sifts through the bathroom’s drawer for the First-Aid kit - Steve (read: Steve, Bucky and Sam, Nat, Clint and even Phil, and sometimes Peggy when she was in town) got into enough bar room brawls with handsy do-you-not-understand-the-meaning-of-’no’ assholes that they kept it on-hand. Bucky does his best to keep his hands from trembling, boulders settling heavily in his stomach as he takes in the older man’s split lip and bruising cheekbone. He doesn’t miss the way Tony seems to shrink in on himself, eyes cast down focusing on trembling hands that fidget restlessly, but it’s clear Tony’s avoiding looking at Bucky and his friends - the brunet bites back the urge to hug the smaller man, because Bucky doubted it would be welcome.

“He was mugged,” Sam finally answers Bucky’s question from earlier, handing Bucky the well stocked medical kit, ducking down in likely search of painkillers while Bucky got started on cleaning up.

“The guy looked pretty high,” Steve says by way of explanation (which does *nothing* to ease the knot of tension between Bucky’s shoulders), coming into the lavatory and hands Tony a glass of water that the man gratefully chugs, “thankfully Sam and I got there before it got worse.”

“‘Worse’?” Balks the singer, staring between Steve and Tony in disbelief, “how the fuck could it have been worse?”

Tony looks about to speak, eyes a bit frantic as he raises a hand to placate Bucky, but it’s Sam who beats him to it, “the guy had an iron pipe, he was about to brain Stark on the sidewalk until Stevie bum-rushed the fucker.”

Bucky stops, hand slowing in its search, and stares at Tony with wide eyes as he undoubtedly pales; his stomach plummets to the floor, voice rasping when the words are all but forced out of him, “…what?”

“They’re making it sound *way* worse than it was, seriously, it wasn’t that bad...I swear,” Tony tries, but there’s a slight tremble to his voice, and Bucky feels his heart sink, fear coursing through his veins - what if Steve and Sam hadn’t been there? If what Sam said really was true, what if Tony… Bucky shakes his head, Steve and Sam *were* there, and right now he had to take care of Tony.

*Get your head on straight, Barnes!*

Sam hands Tony the painkillers (he throws back four of them, but given his state no ones tells him off for it) while Steve sets down frozen peas wrapped in a towel on the bathroom counter, both asking Tony questions to rule out things like concussions and fractured or broken bones; by now,
treating wounds from bar room brawls was old hat to the group…even if this time it was clearly more one-sided than most. Telling the duo to just give them a shout if there was anything else they needed, Sam and Steve leave Bucky to help Tony once they’d run-through the general questions, giving them space in the cramped bathroom.

Bucky carefully swabs at the inventor’s bloodied lip, apologizing every time the man flinches despite Tony telling him it was okay, and feels something snare within his chest as he tries to silence the part of him that roils with thoughts of what if. Bucky stares at his work, Tony’s lip had stopped bleeding and the ivory butterfly stitches looked stark against the brunet’s already bruising cheekbone, but there wasn’t much else to do but leave it to heal naturally - though Bucky does hand him a bag of frozen peas to help with the swelling. However, before Bucky can suggest they move to the living room, he catches the way Tony winces as he rolls his shoulders, Bucky watches the man for a moment before reaching a hand out and gently places a hand on his shoulder to stop him from getting up. Large gorgeously brown eyes stare up at him, and Bucky screams at his libido to shut the fuck up, this is not the damn time! but couldn’t help but think, my god he’s gorgeous, even now.

“Where else?”

“What?” Tony asks, brows creasing at Bucky’s question - it shouldn’t look so endearing, not when the poor man was beaten half to hell, and yet it still was.

“Don’t play dumb, Tony, where else?” Bucky huffs, staring down at the man, “please.”

There’s a moment’s hesitation, and Bucky thinks he’s going to have to manhandle the billionaire (because fuck lawsuits, right?) when the man sighs, body sagging as he reaches down for the the hem of his black shirt and lifts it enough for Bucky to see- fuck! Tony’s flank was already bruising, the red skin quickly turning a violent purple-blue, the thick line undoubtedly left behind by the mugger’s iron pipe only just under Tony’s ribs; no fractures, Bucky’s mind thinks clinically, with the same methodicalness from his days in the army, but internal bleeding could be a possibility.

“Chrest Tony,” Bucky hisses in sympathy, unconscious of the way his hand reaches out, cupping the man’s jaw, right hand warmed by the soft olive skin - Bucky only register’s the touch when Tony leans into his hand, ever so slightly, but the action doesn’t escape him. “Stevie,” he calls out, “can you wrap up that bag of frozen carrots?”

“On it!” His best friend calls back, and Barnes turns back to face Tony who seems to be swaying a little in his seat.

“Do you feel dizzy?”

Tony shakes his head, “just tired…adrenaline crash and all that.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” The question is softly spoken, Bucky’s thumb gently ghosting over the slightly pallid skin of Tony’s cheek.

Tony shrugs minutely, eyes cast to the floor, “it doesn’t matter.” Bucky can’t help but note his ridiculously long lashes, and the bags that scream exhausted under them, “it’ll heal.”

The answer breaks Bucky’s heart, fucking shatters him to hear Tony say the words, his tone and defeated expression making it so painfully clear that Tony didn’t think he mattered. The nonchalance of it, how easily concern for himself was brushed aside; a practiced answer, a believed notion. How was this even possible? Stark, of all people, always held himself like he was the center of the universe, but time and again Bucky’s seen the man put himself second for the sake of others, put himself down - time and again, never saying, but showing how much he didn’t care for himself.
Somehow always unconscious of the fact, even now, beaten bloody and blue. For a second Bucky wished Tony was the self-centered asshole he appeared to be in all those interviews, if only because it would mean that he’d never have to hear an answer like that again. The need to hold the smaller man, to protect him, was almost suffocating right then.

“Tony-”

“Bucky, please, just…” the older man’s pleading trails off, his exhaustion of the night’s events clear, and Bucky drops the subject, but doesn’t dare remove his hand from the man.

“Here you go Buck.” Steve comes in right then and Bucky snatches his hand away from Tony as though he’d been burned; he honestly doesn’t know why he’d done it, his friends know he’s all but gone for the guy, and…he feels like battering himself with an iron pipe when Tony’s expression falls a little sadder at the sudden loss. Trying to save face (and maybe have Tony not think he’s a colossal asshole, though at this point, climbing Everest would probably be easier), he quickly moves to snatch the frozen back from the blond.

“Thanks Stevie, mind if we set Tony up in the guest room for tonight?” Steve’s answer isn’t verbal, but his brief facial expression before leaving them alone says both ‘yes of course, what else were you expecting?’ and ‘Bucky you’re a fucking idiot’ (so he’d seen Bucky pulling away, then…great), how it said all that? Bucky would honestly never know, but that was one of Steve’s many talents.

“Alright,” Bucky sighs, holding the carrots in one hand while the other is held out for Tony to take, “let’s get you to bed.”

“I’m fine, really, I’ll just call Thor-”

“Tony, for the love of- for the love of Star Wars and Monty Python, please don’t fight me on this,” Bucky all but begs, guiding the man to Steve’s guest room, hoping his attempt at levity referencing their inside-jokes would give him some kind go upper-hand. “At the very least just stay the night so I don’t have to worry about you, okay? Just do this for me, please? Stevie gives me enough grey hairs.”

Tony huffs a tired laugh, leaning into Bucky’s side as they walk down the short hallway, “for Star Wars and your pretty head, then.”

“I can’t believe you wouldn’t do it for the Grail,” Bucky teases, chuckling softly as he guides Tony into the guest room.

“I can’t believe you’re worrying so much,” Tony answers back, but before Bucky can argue, he recites with a - rather terrible - accent, “‘tis but a scratch.”

Bucky and Tony pause for a moment, both stood crammed together at the bedroom’s entryway, meeting each other’s eyes before beginning to giggling like school children; it’s upsetting when Tony winces and wheezes, but Bucky cannot deny that seeing him smile again - no matter how briefly - is a comfort. Pushing past the bedroom’s door Bucky gently sets Tony down on the bed, not bothering with the room’s lights since Tony looked about ready to sleep through to the next century. The engineer tries to lean down to pull off his shoes, but Bucky immediately places a hand on the man’s shoulder, halting his actions to keep Tony from further irritating his side and kneels down to work Tony’s shoes off.

It was strange, the uniform motions of the actions reminding him of when he was younger, of the times he’d have to take care of Steve after another back alley fight the moron wouldn’t back down from, or a particularly bad bout of the flu - it was calming, the practiced motions. Reassuring.
Knowing he could somehow help. Pulling off his socks Bucky folds them together and sets them beside Tony’s shoes, eyes flicking up when he hears the soft click of Tony’s belt coming undone, the motions stilling when Bucky’s eyes move further up to meet dark doe eyes. When had he reached for Tony’s belt?

“Sorry,” Bucky rasps out, a whisper of a thing, “sleeping with jeans is just…”

“Uncomfortable,” Tony finishes for him, mouth quirking slightly, and winces slightly at the faint sound of a click escaping him as he swallows.

Bucky’s hands don’t move but instead tighten ever so slightly at Tony’s belt, the metallic prosthetic glinting in the soft moonlight cast over the room from the window, their movements slow to a near stop. Tony’s hands don’t move to brush away Bucky’s hands, instead they tighten slightly on the blanket of the duvet; darkened brown eyes meet Bucky’s blue, and the musician sees the question in them. Bucky tongue darts out to wet his dry lips, hands careful as they work off Tony’s jeans, and drinks in the sight; met with more and more olive-toned skin of muscled thighs, but Bucky doesn’t dare look up at Tony - not trusting himself to look at the man, not trusting himself with what he might do to the man. However, despite his better judgment, Bucky does, and the sight that greets him hits Bucky like a freight train. Structured features cast over with shadows and colored pale-blue in the darkened room, their soft breathing the only audible sound, and for a second Bucky’s terrified Tony can hear the way his heart batters against his ribcage as he sets the dark jeans to the side.

It’s cliché, the way Bucky feels like the world slows around them in that moment, but somehow it just does, and Tony’s presence fills Bucky’s senses. Dizzying. Bucky’s hands move, metal and flesh ghosting over strong thighs, and his heart stutters at the shaky breath he hears from Tony, and gently sets his hands on either side of Tony’s narrow hips on the duvet - fighting the urge to run his fingertips along the elastic hems of Tony’s boxer-briefs that stretch over those strong pale thighs. Bucky wanted to hold Tony, wanted to comfort him and touch him, but for all their flirting jokes and chemistry…is that what Tony wanted? Bucky feels like he’s on the precipice of something, of a decision he doesn’t even begin to understand how to approach, both men watching the other to do something but neither understanding what.

It’s like Tony’s text message all over again, but this time, Bucky can’t afford to miss the opportunity.

Bucky’s flesh and blood hand moves, tentative - terrified - to the hem of Tony’s shirt, the fabric shifting under each of the man’s softly rasping breathes. Bucky looks up, unsure of what he’s searching for; permission? Tony’s reaction? Something that tells him Tony wants this, too? However, instead Bucky sees something else, a shift in Tony’s expression, and he knows it’s suddenly all too late, and he’s left almost breathless - it’s like a blow to the solar plexus - when Tony suddenly clutches at his wrist. Whatever promise that moment held suddenly gone, and Bucky felt like screaming, like begging, but remind silent. I missed it…again, Bucky thinks, and wonders if suddenly crying might make him seem like a madman.

“I…I should sleep,” Tony mutters, voice quiet in the surrounding - now almost oppressive - silence of the bedroom, words slurring ever so slightly with exhaustion. “Busy day tomorrow.”

Bucky swallows, pulling his hands away from the man, trying to breathe past the sudden lump in his throat, “yeah.”

The musician moves to stand, but stills when he feels Tony’s calloused hand wrap around his wrist once again, this time more of a caress than a grip, but he stills all the same. Turning back Bucky can’t see the brunet’s face, head ducked enough to conceal his expression in shadows, but he hears the slight tremble - the hesitation - in Tony’s voice regardless.
“Can you…can you please stay?” The questions almost sounds painful, raw and vulnerable, and Bucky immediately relents - as though he’d ever dream of denying the man’s request. “Just…just until I fall asleep?”

“Of course, Tony,” Bucky answers, a breath of a sound, as though both men were far too worried of breaking the spell of silence the room offered.

Bucky helps Tony lay down, mindful of the man’s battered side, and pulls the covers over him before carefully hauling a chair over to Tony’s bedside. There’s a moment of hesitation, of Bucky second guessing himself, before he tentatively reaches out and takes Tony’s hand in his own from where it peaks out from under the blankets. Something unfurls in Bucky’s chest when Tony’s fingers tighten around his own without hesitation, at the way a smile ghosts over his lips despite the strain it must put on the wound at the corner of it, and Bucky is in disbelief over how right he feel right then; with Tony.

He holds the man tighter, ever so slightly, as though trying to protect Tony from the world, “good night, Tony.”

There’s a pause, a beat of silence, and Bucky fights back the shiver as he feels the man run his thumb along the skin of his wrist and whispers, “g’night, Bucky.”

Tony falls asleep moments later, but Bucky can’t find it in himself to look away just yet, taking in his sleep-soft features and the warmth of Tony’s hand in his own; it’s right then that he knows, knows it to the core of his being, and suddenly tries fighting off the tears that burn his eyes.

*I love him.*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so all you lovely humans that commented last chapter, and to all of you have been leaving Kudos and following these two boys on their journey! I'll see you lovely souls next chapter!! xxoxoo
A Pleasant Morning(?)

Chapter Summary

Bucky has a pleasant morning with boy genius Tony Stark, but...why does something feel off?

Chapter Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to all you lovely readers and Kudos leavers, and I'm sending extra love to all of you who commented! I LOVE hearing from you on this story, and hope you enjoy this next chapter! xxoxoo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky wakes to the soft glow of murky New York light filtering in through Steve’s guest room windows, but more than anything it’s the incessant tweeting of the birds outside that wakes him; even in an active war-zone Bucky could sleep like a log, but these birds seemed particularly persistent (maybe it’s a side effect of being in close proximity to Stevie, he surmises). His first thought is what am I doing in the guest room?, followed mere milliseconds later by his mind internally screeching a course of OW! FUCK! ROBOCOP ON FUCKING TOAST! WHAT THE FUCK?! when he sits up from where he’d been hunched over the bed for several hours, and grimaces as his muscles scream in protest, his spin popping several times into something less resembling The Hunchback of Notre Dame. However, it’s not the birds this time that catches his attention, but the soft sleepy snuffling of a person, and suddenly last night’s events come rushing back to him - his smile is instant.

Bucky is careful to roll his shoulders, not daring to move his right hand where it’s still - somehow - being griped by a sleeping genius. Warmth spreads across his chest as he watches Tony sleeping soundly, what I would give to see this every morning, Bucky catches himself thinking, but for once doesn’t try to discard or deny the thought; right here, right now alone with Tony, safe in the knowledge he can’t make a fool of himself while the engineer sleeps, Bucky lets go of his insecurities momentarily. The sight of Tony asleep is almost haunting, long lashes fanned out over the apples of golden cheekbones, looking far more young and innocent than Bucky’s ever seen him, but it’s as he takes in Tony’s face that he sees the bruising coloring the man’s suddenly delicate features; the discoloration as the side of his slightly puffy split lower lip, and the rest of last nights events wash over Bucky like ice water. That need comes back with an unsteadying rush, the need to protect Tony, and Bucky unconsciously holds the man’s hand a little tighter.

Bucky’s eyes trail over the man’s face, silently cataloging the damage and almost misses it - almost - but his eyes do a double take at Tony’s neck, and feels his chest tighten at the hickey that stares back at him - almost tauntingly. Bucky swallows thickly, some jealous primal part of him suddenly baring its teeth, denial trying to convince him that it was just another bruise from the fucker that hurt Tony last night, but he knows better. The slowly fading purplish-red mark on at the skin just below his jaw, no where near Tony’s other bruises, and Bucky left hand twitches to reach out - as though he could wipe it away - despite himself. A mantra of minelloveyouminiloveyoueonlymine filling his
mind despite knowing he has no right to think as much, because the sad fact was that Tony wasn’t his, not even close. However, it doesn’t stop the rampant jealousy Bucky feels coursing hot and mean in his veins.

Bucky almost regrets touching Tony’s neck, because despite pulling away just as the cool fingertips of his prothetic ghost over the skin of his jaw Tony shifts and turns onto his back, a small groan escaping his lips as his hand slips away from Bucky’s possessive grasp. Whiskey eyes blink open in a sleepy daze for a moment before his brows knit together, probably realizing he isn’t in his own bed, but recognition seems to take over before they turn and meet Bucky’s eyes. The events of last night replay - again - in his mind, the warmth of Tony’s skin under his hands, their whispered words like secret promises, and Tony was so close, close enough that if Bucky just had the guts to tip his head he could have finally kissed-

“Hey,” Tony greets softly cutting into his thoughts, voice sleep-addled and Bucky is immediately taken with the sound, his smile an automatic response.

What’s done is done, is all Bucky can think, no matter how much he wished he could turn back time.

“Hey there,” he answers just and quietly, sitting up and properly stretching in his seat, and sees the look of confusion marring Tony’s features.

“Did you sleep here?” The tone is more disbelieving than accusatory, so Bucky is able to quickly tamp down the - now honestly familiar - feeling of ‘I fucked up’ before nodding, “oh shit, Bucky your back must- you didn’t have to-”

“It’s fine, slept worse before,” Barnes shrugs off the older man’s worries, quickly correcting himself when he sees a frown pulling at the corners of Tony’s mouth, “Stevie…I sleep like this whenever Stevie gets sick, it’s not as often anymore, but it does happen.”

“Mother hens, the lot of you, I swear,” Tony huffs softly, slowly moving to sit up himself, but there’s something about the way he avoids Bucky’s gaze that sets the singer on edge. “You wouldn’t happen to have any coffee, would you?”

Bucky jumps on the topic change like a starving lion on a gazelle, “pretty sure Stevie’s already made a pot, that man wakes up earlier than any normal human should, annoys the hell outta me.”

Tony hums at his answer, eyes flicking towards Bucky then down at his lap before moving to stretch, why won’t he look at me? but before Bucky can really linger on the thought he has to keep himself from dragging Tony into his arms when the man hisses in pain, arms quickly falling to his sides before wrapping one around his midsection, “this sucks.”

“I’m sure it does, Steve and I have had our fair share of coming home banged up,” Bucky reaches over to grab Tony’s clothes, handing him his jeans and socks from the bedside table, ”but it’s nothing a little coffee and painkillers can’t fix.”

“I knew I liked you.” Bucky thinks bitterly, but mentally smacks himself; it wasn’t Tony’s fault Bucky kept missing his chances at seeing if what he felt for the man was even remotely mutual because his head was up his ass, and frankly, he’s blamed the guy for more than enough as is.

The two move to leave the room heading towards the kitchen, and while Tony’s movements are a bit more lagging than Bucky, the musician doesn’t offer to help knowing Tony well enough by now to
know the man wouldn’t appreciate it - last night had been…different, but most things that happened in the cover of twilight never really lasted through to the morning light, no matter how much people like Bucky wished otherwise. They enter the kitchen to see Sam at the stove, the smell of eggs and bacon making Bucky’s mouth water, and knows Tony must have caught the scent of coffee if his groan was anything to go by - *dear lord is that a nice sound*, Bucky thinks before doing the mental equivalent of swatting a dog on the nose with a newspaper.

Bucky moves to the cabinet he knows holds the stash of painkillers, tossing the bottle over to Tony before moving to pour them both some much needed coffee, but as he hands the hot mug to the engineer Bucky stills; in the light of the kitchen the bruises marring Tony’s face - the damn hickey on this throat - stand out far more prominently, and Bucky feels the rage from the night before making a reappearance; the jealousy from just minutes ago rushing back, but quickly stomps them down - Tony didn’t need him sulking.

Sam pulls out three plates, wordlessly filling them, and Bucky stifles a smile when he notices one of the three holds a bigger portion, *Mama Wilson Mode: Activated*, “how are you feeling, Tony?”

The man looks at Sam over the rim of his mug, smiling tiredly, “like I was hit with a train, but I’ve woken up in worse shape before, and this coffee is making up for it; seriously what’s in this? Crack? It’s good.”

Bucky knows he should take Tony’s words for the joke they are, but still finds himself scowling into his own mug instead; all he can fucking think of it Tony waking up in pain, left alone to care for himself in secret, *when was the last time someone had cared for him?* Before Bucky can simmer in his ire, the sound the front door opening and closing catches the group’s attention, the trio turning to see a sweat soaked Steve back from his morning run - Bucky only just managing to bite back the growl he feels itching the back of his throat at the way Tony’s eyes look over his best friend. It’s petty and he knows it, but…sure, Steve is attractive as hell and had he swung Bucky’s way, fuck knows he would have tried for a damn home-run decades ago. However, Steve was very much his straight best friend, and seeing Tony eye him - no matter how briefly - made Bucky want to yip and whine and just- just…look at me not him!

Bucky sighs into his mug and finally takes a sip, okay fine, maybe he wasn’t the composed and mature adult he believed himself to be; at least he said none of that out loud, so that’s a win- why...*why is Sam starring at me like that?* Okay, fine, a partial win.

“Mornin’,” Steve greets, smiling at the people invading his kitchen, heading to the fridge to snatch up his bottle of orange juice. “How are you feelin’ Tony? Any dizziness or nausea?”

“Nah, I’m feeling better, would feel even more so if you tell me what you put in this coffee.”

Steve snorts, “Rogers family secret I’m afraid,” to which Tony laughs at bright and easy, but it’s totally not true, Steve just sprinkles coco powder into the coffee; Bucky hates him, because Steve’s a dork, and a loser and gross and…and, *dear lord I sound like Becca when that boy wouldn’t sit next to her during circle-time in preschool.*

Bucky tries screwing his head back on straight while the other three chatter about easy topics, but once Steve sits down with the rest of them, Tony’s expression grows a little more serious as he sets down his mug; Bucky watches as his tongue prods slightly at the cut on his lower lip, “I…I wanna say thank you, all of you, for last night…I never really got to say it properly with everything that was going on.”

Sam waves a hand, ever the professional (read: professional sap), “it’s no problem man, really.”

Bucky watches with morbid fascination at the way Tony’s eyes harden slightly, his spine straightening as he shakes his head with a determination Bucky can’t help but appreciate, “no, really,
thank you, most people would have looked the other way, but you guys actually put yourselves in harms way for me when you didn’t have to, so thank you.”

The irony of the situation isn’t lost on Bucky, a man who adamantly refuses thanks and yet demands others accept his; Bucky isn’t sure if he wants to laugh or yell at - or just kiss - Tony. Steve and Sam simply nod this time, both men smiling at the engineer who adamantly refuses to meet their gazes, a flush coloring the back of his neck as he stares down at his eggs with a sudden newfound interest. Bucky’s eyes catch Steve’s and the blond wears an expression that blatantly reads, is this guy serious? with such unbelieving fondness that Bucky can’t hold back a soft chuckle as he shakes his head and shrugs. There’s a lull of silent calm that falls over the kitchen; Steve tries stealing one of Bucky’s bacon slices only for the brunet to smack his hand away, the scraping of forks against porcelain filling the quiet when Tony straightens slightly.

“Hey, so I know it may be a long shot, but my birthday party's at the end of the month and…I thought I’d extend an invitation to you,” he starts, timidly looking at the group around the kitchen table, squirreling a little in his seat at the attention (really, who was this guy? And how was he always so heartbreakingly adorable?), “to all of you, whoever you wanna bring, it’s fine. It'll be at my place in Manhattan, easier travel for most guests than the Malibu house.” None of them have a chance to answer when Tony starts prattling on, the insecurity in his nonchalant tone not lost on Bucky, hand absently rubbing over his heart, “I mean I get it if you don’t want to, it’s pretty last minute, I just thought-”

“We'll be there Tony, thanks for the invite,” of all people, it's Steve that cuts in, putting the man out of his misery, “it should be fun.”

The smile that stretches across Tony’s face at the answer is almost blinding (and not for the first time Bucky has to stomp down on his urge to act like a petulant toddler for not being the reason behind it), he opens his mouth to say something when a blaring ringtone cuts him off, and with a curse Tony reaches into his back pocket to fish out his phone, “shit, sorry one second, I gotta take this.”

Tony leaves the kitchen to answer the call, immediately spewing apologizes and placating words to the person on the other end making Bucky chuckle. There’s a moment’s pause, and Bucky should have expected it, but it still catches him off guard the Steve nudges him with a grin.

“So…you and Stark?” Steve's voice was quiet but no less teasing, grinning at Bucky like a goon. Bucky scoffs, feeling his face heat up slightly, “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Oh please, Stevie and I saw you two go off to the room last night,” Sam snorts, raising a dark brow, “and I saw you both leave it this morning, super cute, I must say.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, unable to fight of the grin that pulls at the corners of his lips, “shut up.”

Steve fixes Bucky with a bit ore of a serious look, tilting his head down slightly, voice no longer teasing but sincere as he asks, “but really, do you…” he trails, leaving the question Bucky knows he’s asking hanging in the air, and Bucky knows he can’t deny it (not after last night’s little revelation), and shrugs as he sips his coffee.

“I mean…he’s different than I thought he would be, I mean, you've had to notice by now that he isn’t…isn’t what we thought, what the world thought, and he just…I don’t know, but I swear I just-fuck…yeah I do…I really do,” Bucky knows he doesn’t explicitly say the words aloud, but his admission is close enough to the truth of his feelings for the inventor that he feels his heart swell slightly, the image of Tony holding his hand throughout the night from earlier that morning making him smile that much more.
“Man you’ve got it bad,” Sam chuckles, but there’s no teasing edge to his words, instead he smiles at Bucky and knows he’s already got his friends’ approval on his crush. “Don’t know why we’re surprised though, you’ve always been a sucker for the ‘tortured souls’, I mean remember Ward?”

“To be fair,” Steve adds on to defend his best friend, sort of, “I don’t think Bucky knew Grant was actually in the mafia, at least not at first.”

Bucky raises a brow, about to question what the hell his friends meant when Tony waltzes back into the kitchen, the trio’s conversation thankfully unheard by the man in question who smiles apologetically at them, “sorry about that, Thor and Loki were freaking out about not having heard back from me.”

“No worries- wait, you have people working for you named ‘Thor’ and ‘Loki’? As in the Norse Gods ‘Thor’ and ‘Loki’?” Bucky asks in amused disbelief, topping off his mug.

“Yeah, they’re part of my security team but not related like the tales, both just had hippie parents that were super into D&D I guess,” Tony answers casually as he sits back down, before adding with a mischievous grin, “though, for the sake of plausible deniability, I may or may not have seen Lo turn people into toads, just saying.”

Everyone gives in to a fit of giggles right then, and more than anything Bucky relishes in the way Tony seems so relaxed around them; maybe the coffee dates with his friends and Tony worked out for the better, because the genius seemed familiar enough with his friends’ dry and sarcastic sort of humor that encompassed the following banter that only seemed to make Tony more elated. Bucky chipped in with his own quips and puns (that was a childish part of himself he’d never outgrow), but more than anything, he felt warmed that Tony didn’t seem as hesitant to meet his eyes, and that? That flush on his cheeks right there? Yeah, he would do just about anything to see more of that - and maybe even try to find out how far down it went.

“So, your birthday huh?” Bucky starts once the laughter dies down, “what do billionaires do to celebrate?”

Tony chuckles, picking up his mug as he taps away at his phone for a moment, and Bucky’s own device buzzes seconds later, “well definitely expect some Gallagher shit, I’m a sucker for a mess, but last year we - accidentally - set a world record that I am totally aiming to break this year. I also sent you the information.”

“Wait,” Sam starts, face contorted in an expression of serious confusion, a playful note in his words as he continues, “what do we get you? Like, how do you shop for someone who can afford everything? Also, world record?”

“Wait,” Sam starts, face contorted in an expression of serious confusion, a playful note in his words as he continues, “what do we get you? Like, how do you shop for someone who can afford everything? Also, world record?”

“For the sake of Pepper’s sanity, I can’t comment on exactly what the record was, but you could Google it.” Bucky had never seen Sam move so fast to get to his phone before, and Tony calls out after him, “it’ll be the third link down, after the Fox News one calling me a Satanist!”

Bucky and Steve share a look, guffawing over the fact that Tony has yet to fail in surpassing them with his insane stories.

“But really, Sam’s right, what the hell do we get you?” Bucky asks, looking over to Steve for any clues.

There’s a small pause, Steve meeting Bucky’s gaze, “you knit a sweater?”

The laughter is immediate, comfortable and natural amongst the group, Tony rushes out through his
giggles, “hell yes! I demand it be fuchsia pink, and a fluffy, I will accept no less.”

“Oh my lord that reminds me of this one year at Christmas when Steve’s aunt Marissa knit him this horrid sweater.”

“Hey, I happen to like that sweater!” Steve defends, throwing Bucky a playful glare.

“Stevie it had fucking bells on it, we heard you comin’ from a mile away, and the reindeer nose zapped you whenever it lit up.” Bucky turns to grin at Tony, speaking through his laughter at the memory, “anyway, at around two in the morning Stevie nearly gives his ma a damn heart attack because this freak decided to sit in the kitchen, in the dark, and eat cookies! I heard her screaming all the way from Steve’s room, the entire house scrambled to see what was up only to see Sarah reading her only son the Riot Act on Christmas Eve.”

“Though to be fair, I don’t think that was a shocking site for anyone.” Steve cackles a laugh, throwing an arm around Bucky’s shoulders when he adds, “I swear ma nearly threw a pot at my head thinkin’ someone broke into the house.”

“Never underestimate Sarah Rogers man,” Sam says as he reenters the kitchen, slightly distracted by his phone, grinning like a fiend. “One time I was over at Steve’s for Thanksgiving and I was trying to diet, the look Sarah had on her face when I said as much was like I just insulted her ancestors, I was pretty sure that if I didn’t accept that plate of food she would have wrestled me to the ground and funneled it into me.”

“Like you complain,” Steve flushes slightly, rolling his eyes as he gently shoving Bucky away, trying and failing - miserably - to glare at Bucky, “all these years and Bucky still relies on my cooking.”

“Just recalling the time you nearly set our dorm room on fire making me hot coco for my birthday.”

“Stevie’s such a mother hen about us eating, got it from his mama,” Bucky jokes, unsure what the hell Sam meant but making a mental note to ask him about it, and pokes Steve’s side before reaching for his mug chuckling at the way the blond jolts - ticklish dork.

“Like you complain,” Bucky dismisses what he saw, or at least what he thinks he saw, and tells himself he’s just being paranoid over Tony - now more than ever hyperaware of the man’s expressions, clearly to the point
over overreacting to every minute detail. Instead, Bucky enjoys the rest of his morning which is spent in Steve’s kitchen, the small group easily falling into friendly banter and retelling childhood stories (apparently Tony still believes being expelled from his fourth boarding school was so worth it after filling the sprinkler system with paint, because it meant he won the paintball war), and with every glance at Tony, Bucky knows he wants nothing more than to have more mornings like this; mornings surrounded by his friends and Tony, and if he’s the reason for Tony’s smiling laughter, he won’t complain one bit.

Chapter End Notes

I hope y'all enjoyed! This was defiantly a bit more of a laidback chapter, but buckle in for what’s to come! Though, I wonder what was up with Tony? Tell me what you think! I'll see all you lovely humans next chapter! xxoxoo
Acting the Fool

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bucky seem to have a definite commonality between them; acting the fool (or so they believe).

Chapter Notes

Handy-wavy legal terms and stuff, hope it makes sense hahaha! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

James Barnes - May 4th, 1:24PM: saw this and thought of u hahaha :D

James Barnes - May 4th, 1:24PM: [VIDEO ATTACHMENT]

James Barnes - May 4th, 9:34PM: what u think?

James Barnes - May 6th, 1:17PM: hhhheelllooo????

James Barnes - May 6h, 4:01PM: Hello? Stark u there?

James Barnes - May 7th, 11:04AM: Is everything okay? Did dummy blow the lab up or something? haha

James Barnes - May 8th, 12:52PM: [MISSED CALL]

James Barnes - May 8th, 12:54PM: [VOICE MAIL]

James Barnes - May 10th, 1:09PM: Tony just answer me, literally a shit emoji is enough..I’m worried, okay?

James Barnes - May 11th, 6:02PM: [MISSED CALL (4)]

James Barnes - May 11th, 6:14PM: [VOICE MAIL (3)]
To say Bucky was losing his mind may have been an exaggeration to others, but to him, it felt like the word didn’t even begin to cover how he’d felt over the past week. Bucky told himself Tony wasn’t answering his texts simply because he was busy, because what else could it have been? The explanation satisfied Bucky’s paranoia for about three days, before he’d decided to bite the bullet - and maybe after more than one freak out session - and call the engineer, only to be met with Tony’s voicemail time and again - by this point, Bucky’s memorized the damn thing. He knew he was probably coming off clingy as hell, but…I’m worried, is all Bucky could think to himself; Tony wasn’t the best at looking after himself, and while Bucky wasn’t Tony’s Keeper, he did care about the man. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was happening (as much as he hated to admit it); Bucky was being ignored by Tony, but why?

What had he done wrong? Bucky’d thought he and Tony were actually getting along pretty well, especially the morning after he’d been mugged - much to his chagrin that it took a mugging for them to get closer - and thought that maybe they’d actually had something; had been wrong? But why would Tony invite Bucky and his friends to his birthday party if he didn’t at least feel amicable towards him? You said it yourself, Buck, you missed your chance, the thought stills the brunet, fuck did…did Tony move on? It was possible, after all, Bucky had no claim on the man and he did find a hickey on Tony’s neck that morning; Steve said Tony hadn’t been far from a local - if sketchy - club, had he been on a date? Had that been it? Had Tony moved on? Was he ever even interested in you in the first place to even need to ‘move on’? the thought snared something horrible in Bucky’s chest.

Something in Bucky told him to quit while he was ahead, to not do anything that would make him an even bigger fool, but a larger, far more selfish part of him thought fuck that, I’ve missed enough goddamn chances. Because those moments with Tony, when everything else just faded into the background and it was just them, Bucky knew Tony felt them too - he must have…right? You’ll never know if you don’t speak up, Barnes, and that reasoning was how Bucky found himself taking the private elevator down to Tony’s workshop two - unbearably silent - days later.

This is ridiculous, the brunet thinks to himself as he paces the small carriage, he’s probably busy organizing his birthday, and you’re probably creeping the guy the hell out by being so clingy Barnes, and yet Bucky couldn’t bring himself to turn back - not when he’d already come so far. The singer walks into Tony’s workshop, and for the first time wasn’t met with any music; he wasn’t sure if his worry outweighed his curiosity or not. However, Bucky’s worries were laid to rest when his gaze falls upon Tony’s sleeping form strewn on the ‘shop’s couch and stopped dead in his tracks, unable to help himself from drinking in the sight, making sure it was forever seared into his mind.

Bucky had felt the primal hindbrain in him howl for Tony, want to pin the man down and take; wanted to join him on that couch, wrap himself around Tony and never let go. It was a war between lust and love in his heart, and Bucky didn’t know which side he wanted to win. Bucky noticed the blanket that had long since fallen to the floor, and wanted nothing more than to pick it up and wrap it around Tony, wrap his arms around the sleeping man and shield him from the rest of the world. He wanted to be close enough to feel every shift and hum, close enough to feel every one of Tony’s
sleepy snuffling breathes against his neck; he wanted it all. Wanted nothing more than to be the person Tony woke up to, not unlike the morning they’d (sort of) spent the night together, and stroke his fingers through the man’s unkempt hair. Bucky wanted it all, everything and anything Tony would give him, he wanted Tony and it was almost too much; too terrifying to admit that, fuck...I’m so gone for this guy.

Bucky swallows down his dizzying want and takes a tentative step toward the man’s sleeping form, then another, and another until he’s standing within arm’s reach. Reaching down to grab hold of the tossed aside blanket, Bucky gently lays the cover over Tony’s limp body and stills; what am I doing? Because that was the real question, wasn’t it? What was he doing? Tony was a genius billionaire with people undoubtedly lining up to be with him, and what was he but a veteran with a day job and hopes of someday ‘making it’ in the music industry. It was honestly almost laughable, hysterical that - for just a moment - Bucky believed he could pursue this, could pursue Tony. Bucky stands up abruptly and is unable to stop the broken chortle that leaves him, his body’s involuntary response to his own idiocy; it was almost cliché to admit, but someone like Tony would never want someone like Bucky.

Turning to leave, Bucky jumps when his phone starts to buzz and chime in his back pocket, fumbling for the device he answers it just to shut the damn thing up and - hopefully - leave before Stark realizes what a clingy idiot he is, “hello?”

“Hey,” greets the familiar voice of Natasha, her smooth smokey tone working it’s usual magic on his nerves (breathe, Bucky, he has to remind himself), “I know this is last minute, but a friend of mine just called saying their main act dropped out last second, something about some in-band fighting or whatever, and asked if we were willing to step in. I’ve spoken with the rest of the guys and they’re in, it’s up to you though.”

Bucky glances over his shoulder at Tony's sleeping form, the man snoring softly before shifting around in his sleep, “yeah, just send me the location.”

Ending the call Bucky makes it two steps towards the elevator when he hears a muffled thump and curse, whipping around he finds Tony on the floor in a tangled up in the blanket, “Bucky?”

“Well so much for making sure he didn't' know I was here, Bucky thinks before turning towards the man fully, “hey Tony.”

“I’m dreaming, aren’t I?” The man asks, blinking sleepily at the brunet, “there’s no other reason you’d be here.”

Bucky doesn’t bother fighting the fond smile that pulls at his lips, “actually, you weren’t answering your phone so I assumed your AI finally went Skynet and took over, what? Don’t look at me like that, I panicked.”

“So you came all the way here just to check up on me?” Despite the phrasing of the words, Bucky knew it wasn’t a real question, instead it sounded like Tony was saying the words aloud to actually makes sense of the situation to himself; there was something about the lazy smile on his face that made Bucky’s stomach do a little flip.

“You’re over analyzing, Barnes, calm the fuck down, he silently reprimands himself, and finds himself saying, “why are you sleeping down here?”

Subtle, Buchanan.

Tony huffs, scrubbing a hand down his face and through his sleep-mussed hair, “didn’t mean to, late
night working and J insisted on a nap, guess it lasted longer than I’d meant for it to if it’s already-wait, what time’s it?”

Bucky blames Steve for the way his mother hen hackles rise at that information, but swallows down the lecture of you need more sleep, Tony, and instead answers, “almost six.”

Tony sighs a curse and shifts to stand, lithe arms scratched over his head, exposing a tantalizing strip of skin at the hem of his grease stained vest, Bucky’s eyes track the movement for a moment before looking away - he has to get this damn...infatuation under control. Bucky knows he should leave, Tony seemingly believed his excuse as to why he was in the man’s workshop, so he should just leave before he made things worse; so he isn’t sure why he finds himself speaking instead.

“My band’s playing a gig tonight.” Tony watches Bucky, the latter shifting on the spot, unsure of how to exactly wrap up what he means to say, but Stark seems to take mercy on him.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen a live show,” Tony says thoughtfully, rubbing a hand over his heart, “I should shower first, what time-”

“I can wait,” Bucky blurts out, mentally smacking himself, and tries again. “Tasha should send me the location in a bit, the guys can set up on their own so we can head there together...you game?”

Tony considers this for a moment, then nods slowly, grinning at Bucky wickedly, and he feels his stomach twist and free fall at the sight, I’m so fucked, “don’t you know me by now, Barnes? I’m always game.”

And Bucky would deny it under the threat of death, but the thoughts and images that follow after Tony’s words would have his mother turning in her grave.

So much for not looking the fool.

There was always a simplicity to bars that Tony appreciated far more than clubs, which probably let down the public’s belief of Tony’s preferences, but that was their fault not his; there was something about the intimacy that dive bars offered - that the depersonalized environment of clubs never could - that Tony adored. Maybe it was because it reminded him of his early days at MIT, when it had just been him and Bruce and Rhodey, a pitcher of beer and a plate of chicken wings so hot it brought tears to their eyes - no matter what they claimed. So yeah, Tony Stark liked bars and it wasn’t even because of the liquor and pretty women and men (though they were a plus), who knew? Hint: not TMZ.

Tony sat at the bar, sipping on his craft beer; the opening act hadn’t finished long ago (they were called the Valkyries, an all-female punk-rock band that reminded him of the sort of wild punk-rockers he grew up on, so Tony may or may not have bought their LP…and got a selfie with the band, too), so there wasn’t much for the Commandos to do aside from adding their own frills to set up, and not even halfway through his second beer Tony was nodding to the beats of Clint’s drums and Sam’s guitar. The song had been the one Tony listened to in the privacy of his workshop, but Bucky’s voice was no less impressive live - somehow even more so - and Tony felt his chest tighten, enraptured by the man’s magnetism, his natural showmanship on stage before a live audience that seemed just as captivated as Tony; he was born for this, Tony thinks.

The morning at Steve’s had replayed in Tony’s mind again and again, for so many reasons, and he’d been a fucking fool hadn’t he? Waking up next to Bucky - even if they hadn’t been in the same bed,
more’s the shame, honestly - had almost felt like a dream, one Tony would have happily punched himself in the face for to make sure it was reality had it not been for the throbbing there already, but it was clear where Bucky’s interest lay; with Steve. How had he not seen it before? Tony had been so good at picking up things like that in the past, but clearly he was rusty at it now, and that morning made it jarringly clear; Steve and Bucky were together. The easy intimacy and camaraderie between them, and the life-long accumulation of shared stories to tell, right down to the mundane fact that Steve never missed any of Bucky’s appointments said it all - he’d seen the sign-in sheets, knew Steve had been there each time Bucky needed a chaperone, despite their sizable group of friends, it had always been Rogers and no one else.

He’d been an idiot to think there was anything between them, even if for the tiniest of moments, in that dark room he’d been sure, so sure Bucky was going to kiss him. Though, when you got right down to it, there was just one question Tony believed was worth asking; who could love someone like him? A man who - to most - was a philandering ex-arms dealer nearing his forties, and - to himself - knew he wouldn’t make it to forty, while Bucky wasn’t even in his mid-thirties yet; easiest answer? Not someone as amazing as James Buchanan Barnes, no, that much was made painfully clear. Tony believed it was for the best, being alone in that room with Bucky… it had so nearly broken his resolve, he knew if Bucky had kissed him, Tony would have undeniably given in. But he didn’t, Tony thinks, and the next morning he was wrapped around Rogers, only leaving his side long enough to see Tony to the door, and he never will.

Tony resolved to ignore Bucky, ignoring the man’s texts and - to Tony’s honest surprise when they’d started coming in - his calls, at least until he got his head back on straight, and yet he still somehow found himself at a bar with Bucky; watching Bucky on stage, interacting with Steve in a way that made his chest ache almost unbearably - and Tony had experience with unbearable chest pain, and this? This made what happened in that cave feel like heartburn. What had he been thinking? Tony was lying to himself if he thought, even for a second that he could compete with someone as perfect as Steve Rogers; no matter how much Tony wanted to hate the man, he’d even done Tony a favor hadn’t he? Keeping Tony’s secret when he didn’t have to, and Tony silently wished the man was a bit more of a dick, if only to give him a reason to hate him - but as it was, Tony kind of liked Rogers. Why am I still here? he asks himself for the hundredth time, and yet Tony couldn’t find the will to leave, because if he left…he didn’t think his heart could take coming back, and Bucky was clearly a persistent fucker - Tony hated that he loved that about him so much. For a man who prided himself on his knowledge, Tony was as dumb as a fucking stump when it came to Bucky, never able to deny the man, no matter how much he knew he probably should.

Simpler times indeed, Tony thinks with a sigh, finishing off his beer before hopping off the barstool and makes his way closer to the stage, pausing for a moment at the merch table that had been set up and manned by a bored looking brunette, “how much for the shirt?”

The woman looks up at Tony, pointing to the black shirt with the band’s logo ‘Howling Commandos’ printed across the chest in simple but faded bold grey lettering, “twenty bucks.”

“I’ll take it,” Tony says, pulling out his wallet and hands the young woman a hundred dollar bill, waving off her motions at retrieving his change and snatches up the shirt.

“You’re Tony Stark,” the girl suddenly states, but her facial expression doesn’t give away any surprise as to why a billionaire would be in a dive bar watching a relatively no-name rock band.

“And you are?”

“Darcy Lewis,” she answers, shoving the change into the back pocket of her skinny jeans, “what’s a place like this doing in a guy like you?”
Tony can’t help but snort at the cheesy joke, immediately liking the girl all the more for it, “I’m a slut for good music, and the fact that this lot seems to be made up of GQ models doesn’t hurt.”

Darcy grins, leaning in conspiratorially, nodding her head towards where Natasha is on stage, “I call dibs on the bassist.”

Tony barks a laugh, “looks like I won’t have to scratch your eyes out then, I call dibs on the singer,” as if hearing him, Bucky’s eyes lock with Tony’s when the man looks back to the stage, a smile pulling at the singer’s lips.

“Seems to be mutual,” Darcy teases, and Tony feels like a blushing virgin right then because no one man’s smile should ever be so captivatingly effervescent. “I know what you did for Buck and Clint, on behalf of those morons, thank you.”

It’s suddenly all too much, Darcy’s sincerity and Bucky’s weighted gaze, it’s all too much and Tony finds himself fleeing to the restroom. Barging into the lavatory - that was thankfully empty - Tony leans against the door, the muffled music of the Commandos, a sound that had been overwhelming just seconds ago, somehow turns calming and Tony finds himself able to breathe again. Not an attack then, just needed a breather, Tony concludes, about to run a hand through his hair when he’s met by the coal colored fabric and a band logo, Tony takes a moment before deciding to change into it. Pulling the band shirt over his head, Tony looks at himself in the mirror, they’re just being nice, being friends, so calm down Stark, he tells his reflection before shoving his crew neck into his back pocket, about to leave the lavatory when his phone buzzes in his pocket; Pepper.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Tony asks in way of greeting, peering at himself again through the dirtied bar’s bathroom mirror and tries to fix his mussed hair.

“So maybe Monaco wasn’t such a bad idea,” Pepper answers, her personal brand of fond exasperation making Tony smile, “the volunteers agreed, every single one.”

There’s a moment of genuine surprise, but Tony knows better than to show his hand, “of course it was a good idea, I thought of it, after all.”

“It’s planned for after your birthday,” Pepper says, unfettered by Tony’s answer, “it’ll give the volunteers enough time to get to a good place in their physical therapy, and the therapists don’t seem to be put off by the prospect of a paid vacation, so they’re in too. I’m getting things settled with security and the hotels, but it’ll be ready for the end of June.”

Tony snorts, “of course Xavier’s team would agree, he knows a good deal when he sees one, but tell him Lehnsherr better pull the rod out of his ass if he expects to come; married or not, Charles is husband is such a killjoy. I’ll let Bucky and his friends know.”

“The fact Erik hasn’t beaten you over the head with one of your prosthetics is beyond me,” Pepper huffs, and Tony can almost see the fond shake of her head, “all I ask is that you work on the specs for the Expo, okay?”

“Anything for you, Pep.”

“Also, I spoke with Jeri and Matt,” Tony leans on the bathroom sink, fingers tapping at the porcelain as he listens intently, “they said they have a case, a strong one actually, especially after the evidence you gave them from Bucky’s surgery. Foggy looked over the contracts other Hammer patients had signed, the NDA said they couldn’t sue Hammer for malfunctions, but it doesn’t say anything about medical issues caused by the prosthetics-”
“Thank Star Trek Hammer is still as much of an idiot as he was in university,” Tony mumbles, and Pepper chuckles as she continues.

“Thank Star Trek indeed, Jeri is working on putting a case together to have their shoddy prosthetics program shut down by the time the Stark line is out, it’ll very likely look like attack on Hammer Tech, but by then Matt should have built up and taken to court several clients on the basis of the prosthetics harming them to back up that it is because of crappy prosthetics instead of some money-grab. If it all works out, coming at Hammer from the smaller to the more substantial courts, Hammer won’t have a choice but to shut down his prosthetics line, and after that, we can finally help the people he hurt get better prosthetics without conflict of interest or be accused of ‘bribery’.”

“Have I ever told you how much I love you?” Tony asks with a grin, teeth worrying at his lower lip for a moment as the words sink in a little more before speaking, “I want a list of the people willing to take Hammer to court, so I can have their prosthetics ready as soon as possible once this is all over. I’ll speak with Bucky about possibly testifying to his experience with the Hammer Tech arm, Dr. Cho practically jumped on the chance to take Justin to court, and I know for a fact Erik and Charles will help any way they can; for all the shit I give them, I know they’re reliable. We…shit Pep, I think we can actually do this, help all those people.”

“Honestly Tony, I don’t ‘think’ we can, I know it. Jeri is only really ever in anything for the notoriety and money, but she’s a hell of a lawyer; Matt and Foggy looked just about ready to throw a party at finally holding Hammer accountable for something, so I know they’ll be just as vicious. We’ll get the slime ball, Tony, and help a lot of other people doing it.”

“I couldn’t have done this without you, Pep, honestly, thank you.”

“As much as you drive me crazy, I’d do anything for you, Tony,” the sincerity in her voice has Tony wiping at his eyes, not now, don’t you dare tear up now, “taking Justin down is just a bonus…and Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m proud of you,” and isn’t that a sucker punch to the solar plexus? Tony feels the ache between his eyes, his warning of Waterworks Immanent before doing his best to keep it from happening, but can’t help the smile that tugs at his lips. “Now go have fun with Bucky and his friends, you deserve it.”

With that Pepper ends the call, Tony doesn’t bother wondering how she knew what he was up to given Pepper Potts knows All Things, and instead walks out if the lavatory with a grin and sense of satisfaction Tony doesn’t think he actually deserves, but relishes in all the same. Tony only just makes it out the door before he has a near-death experience - and, no, the irony isn’t lost on him - when he’s met by wide grey eyes, Tony is saved from landing on his ass after jumping a few feet into the air by a pair of strong arms - both metal and flesh - wrapping around his waist.

“Y’know if you wanna kill me there are less pant-soiling ways, right?” He huffs a chuckle, trying to glare at Bucky, and very likely failing.

“I saw you run off and got worried,” Bucky says instead, eyes flitting over Tony’s face. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine Robo Cop, just needed to take a leak,” Tony answers, all too aware of Bucky’s arms still
secure around his middle. “Did your set finish?”

“Nah, just an intermission, we’re back on in five,” Bucky replies, eyes flicking down to the shirt Tony’s changed into, and raises a brow with a grin. “New shirt?”

It takes Tony a second understand what Bucky means, “Wha- oh! Yeah, I mean, if I’m gonna claim to be your number one fan I gotta have the gear, right?”

There’s lull in silence right then, Bucky seemingly leaning in ever so slightly, “number one fan, huh?”

Tony can feel the singer’s breath warming his face and swallows thickly, eyes flicking down to that damn sinful mouth for just a second, but that second is more than enough because Tony finds himself thinking of all the damn things he wants to do with that fucking mouth. Bucky’s chest is pressed ever so slightly against Tony’s, for a fleeting moment he worries the man will feel the hard rim of his arc reactor, but can’t find it in himself to step away - despite knowing he should, knowing this wouldn’t culminate in anything resembling a ‘happy ending’. Instead, Tony feels his mouth drying, heart screaming to just get a taste of those lips; relishing in the slight way Bucky’s hands seem to tighten minutely at the base of his spine.

“I like it…it’s almost like a claim, don’t you think?” Bucky whispers into the scant space between them, his voice sending a shiver through Tony, hooded eyes making his heart beat double time. Do you see that? That right there? That is Tony’s so called ‘logic’ being flung out a goddamn window, IwantthispleaseIwantthisIwantyou-

“Buck-”

“BARNES!” The duo jolt apart like guilty children, and when had Tony been breathing so hard? It’s Natasha they turn around to see, green eyes flicking back and forth between them for a moment, brow raised like a mother’s would at having known exactly what was going on - Tony fights off the urge to ask her, because he has no damn idea.

“Yeah, Nat?” Bucky prompts, had his voice always been so gravelly?

“We’re back on in a minute, get your ass to stage.” With that Natasha turns to leave, just as a stranger brushes past Tony to enter the restroom, the moment broken and right then Tony is reminded of why this isn’t something he can do; Steve, he forces himself to remember the man who - despite their turbulent beginning - has been doing his best to befriend Tony. As if summoned, the blond spots Tony from the stage and waves like a kid at a talent show before moving to pick up his guitar, Tony waves back with a trembling hand.

“Will you be sticking around?” Bucky asks and Tony doesn’t jump (damnit he doesn’t), flesh hand rubbing at the back of his neck as he turns to look at engineer, who nods - not trusting his voice - and the smile he gets is damn worth the way his heart undoubtedly skipped a couple of beats - too many to possibly be healthy.

What the hell am I doing? Tony thinks as Bucky takes his hand in his metal one, what the hell are you doing Bucky? and drags the man to the front of the stage before bounding off. Tony curses when a new voice makes him jump out of his skin; what was this? Scare the shit out of Tony night? Was there a betting pool?

“He’s an idiot, but he’s worth it,” Darcy says beside him, arms folded over her chest as she watches the second set begin, “I haven’t seen him smile that in…well, ever.”
Tony swallows thickly, watching the Howling Commandos starting their second set, Bucky’s eyes coming back to meet Tony’s ever few moments and feels his chest tighten. *That isn’t a good thing,* Tony thinks helplessly, but doesn’t say, because it was only time before he dropped dead and where would Bucky be then? *With Steve, that’s where.* Bucky’s voice washes over him, and Tony thinks, belatedly, that wasn’t he supposed to be thinking of him as ‘Barnes’? *You’re long past boundaries, Stark,* and hates himself for how true that is, no matter how hard he fights to not believe it. It’s just physical attraction, he knows, especially when he watches how Steve and Bucky interact on stage like two parts of the same person. *It’s just physical, nothing more.*

“Hey Darcy?” The girl hums in response, glancing at Tony, “how do you feel about a trip to Monaco?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone for reading and commenting, I love you all! xxoxoo
Chapter Summary

Bucky is talked around to opening up by an unlikely friend, but it doesn't mean it'll be easy....

Chapter Notes

Hello! You may have noticed the story increased from 21 chapters to 24, turns out through editing I realized some issues and had to add in a few chapters for the sake of better storytelling and continuity - this chapter is actually brand new, created today through a lot of panicking and pacing, but I got there haha! I really hope you enjoy!

P.S. the German translations can be found at the End Notes!

P.P.S. Hand-wavey legal stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on Barnes, just one more,” Erik encourages, standing near the weight bench where Bucky struggles through one last chest press, but Bucky appreciates that the man doesn’t hover over him - over the past few months Lehnsherr proved to trust his patients with what they were capable of doing, and in turn no one pushed themselves harder than they knew to be safe. “Gut gemacht!”

“Danke,” Bucky huffs in reply using his (slightly rusty) German, sitting up and rolling his shoulders, gratefully accepting the water bottle when Erik hands it to him, “aber ich glaube ich bin gerade gestorben.”

“Nein, dir geht es gut,” the head physical therapist chuckles, gently clapping Bucky on the back and sitting beside him, “now, care to tell me what’s got you so distracted?”

It never fails to amuse Bucky how straight-to-the-point Lehnsherr was, it was a relief - even in the beginning - that the man never tip-toed around anything like so many others had in the past; Lehnsherr’s very first words to Bucky had proved as much, ‘you’re not weak and I won’t treat you as such, so get ready to work your ass off to prove to everyone and yourself just how strong I know you are’. It sometimes still made Barnes bulk when he’d remember that Charles and Erik were married; talk about opposites attracting, he chuckles to himself. Bucky almost waves the man’s concerns away, but Erik was never much for touchy-feely subjects like his husband, so the fact that he was bringing up that Bucky was acting funky really said something.

Running his slightly trembling right hand through his sweat-matted hair, Bucky sighs, “it’s that noticeable, huh?”

“Pretty sure if I wasn’t talking to you right now, Charles would have sniffed it out and materialized within seconds to see what was wrong, which would be quiet a feat given he’s in DC at a Psychiatry convention,” Barnes barks a laugh and leans into where Erik’s hand is large and warm in between
his shoulder blades, comforting; his hands were always surprisingly gentle, \textit{maybe there’s more to him than meets the eye}, and Bucky felt like cackling, because that seemed to be a running theme in his life right now.

“It’s…it’s silly, I know it is but, \textit{fuck} Erik I don’t know what to do,” Bucky starts, his voice trembling no matter how hard he tries to control it, and blinks away the ache at his temples, “I…I really care about this guy, but every chance I get to \textit{do} something about it I chicken out, and whenever I somehow gather up the courage to \textit{go for it} I just…he’s so \textit{amazing} and all I can ever think is ‘how would someone like that go for someone like me?’ then I see this \textit{sadness} in his eyes and fall back into that well of insecurity that just has me backing away even more. I don’t…I don’t know what to \textit{do}.”

There’s a moment’s pause, Barnes thinks he’s lost Erik until he peers up to see the man giving him a flat look and says, “you’re right, it is silly.” Bucky couldn’t help himself, the laugh punching out of him, and maybe that’s what Lehnsherr was aiming for because the man chuckles softly before continuing. “As you know, my husband is a paraplegic…we’d actually met pretty soon after it had happened, as unprofessional as it sounds - and I’ll deny it if you every try using it against me - he was actually a patient of mine, at first.

“The Charles then wasn’t the Charles you know now, I remember this scrawny little thing that was angry at the world for what he’d lost; you wouldn’t \textit{believe} how bitter and depressed he was, Barnes. He was an insufferable \textit{prat} most of the time,” Erik runs a hand over his face as he huffs the words, clear that looking back it was out of fondness, but there was still a twinge of pain underlying in his usually stoic face and voice. “But I knew he was hurting, that he felt like he’d lost all control and was nothing more than a victim, and for Charles that hurt more than anything because when he was helpless, how could he help others? But I told him what I told you when we started working together-”

“‘You’re not weak and I won’t treat you as such, so get ready to work your ass off to prove to everyone and yourself just how strong I know you are’,” Bucky recites Erik’s very first words to him, and the man nods with a warm smile.

“It wasn’t easy, but Charles eventually found himself, the man you and so many others now know wasn’t the man I’d met years ago. He said I’d helped, even though I had no idea how; said that \textit{he} felt he wasn’t worthy of me no matter how mad I thought that was, because to me, Charles is heaven sent. Sometimes, James, we don’t know the affect we have on others, or the affect they have on \textit{us}…but sometimes, just being around that person is enough.” Erik looks at Bucky again, squeezing his shoulder gently, “if that man truly is as amazing and \textit{sad} inside as you believe, then \textit{be with him}, because no one is beyond help, but sometimes we need to be reminded we don’t have to do everything alone; be reminded of who we \textit{truly} are, not what the world made us to be.”

Bucky stares at Erik, slightly awestruck; Charles always seemed so put together, and for all of Bucky’s little teasing thoughts about him and Erik he’d never thought it started with such hard road, \textit{but maybe the struggle is worth it, if you really love the person you’re struggling for}. Barnes nods, slowly, letting Lehnsherr’s words sink in. The sadness he’d always seen in Tony’s eyes, the loneliness he \textit{knew} was there, even if the genius never admitted to it, was so painfully clear to Bucky time and again; from their first meeting, to the morning at Steve’s, Tony bore the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he did it alone.

\textit{He doesn’t have to do it alone, not any more.} Bucky swallows, throat clicking, \textit{because he has me… and I’ll tell him as much, no matter how many times or how long it takes.}

“I see that little light going off,” Erik chuckles, deep baritone cutting through the silence of the
private gym, moving to stand he holds a hand out to Bucky, “now that that’s settled, ready for your last round?”

Barnes grins up at Lehnsherr, taking his hand into his own with a light clap and pulls himself to stand, a new found conviction solidifying in his chest, “thanks Erik.”

“You can thank me by never mentioning any of that to anyone, I’ve built my reputation on being a terrifying tyrant, imagine what would happen if people found out I had feelings?”

Bucky barks a laugh that Erik soon joins in on, the duo making one last round of the gym to strengthen and stretch Bucky’s body to the new prosthetic, further acclimating his body to it, and honestly Lehnsherr was amazing at his job because Bucky had never felt this good in his own skin - though he knew Tony was just as much to thank for that. It was good, to get out of his own head for a while through the routine workouts and easy banter that now seemed to flow easily between him and Erik, and the final round seemed to go by far quicker than the singer had realized. However, his loose and jello-esque muscles go taut within an instant when he checks his phone in the locker room an hour later, and perhaps clutches his phone a little too tightly in his prosthetic.

Tony Stark - Today, 4:46PM: Hey Bucky, I need to speak with you, would you mind meeting me at my penthouse at 7?

Fuck, Bucky swallows through his slowly building panic, fuckfuckfuck I-I can’t... NO... fuckssake Barnes, you can and you fucking will! This could be a good thing, remember what Erik said... you can do this, Bucky repeats the last words to himself over and over - lest he lose his nerve - as he types out his reply.

You - Today, 5:13PM: I’ll b there

No turning back now.

Bucky can’t stop fidgeting for the life of him, leaning from one foot to the other like an impatient child at a toy store, eyes remaining glued to the numbers of the elevator as they counted up to the top floor; to Tony’s penthouse. Why did Tony want to speak with him? Had he overstepped at the bar? Was something wrong? Had Bucky done something? However, before he could even come up with some kind of battle plan the elevator dings one last time moments before the doors silently part. He’d only been to Tony’s home one time before, with Clint, but this time he couldn’t help but feel like a lone soldier about to go into battle. Swallowing his nerves Bucky steps out of the carriage, about to call out but stops, he hears... voices, no, fighting, and moves before he can really come up with a plan.

I swear to hell if it’s Stone I’ll throw him out a goddamn windo-

“Anthony if you would just listen-”

“You lost your chance at a civil conversation the second you decided to cut corners with people’s lives, Hammer! End of discussion!” Tony barks back, Bucky enters the living room just in time to see Hammer’s face blip out from the screen, the room falls silent for a moment as Tony runs a hand through already mussed hair. “FUCK!”

“Tony?” Barnes calls out cautiously, the genius all but jumps out of his skin, whipping around he stares at Bucky for a moment before recognition sets in and tries for a smile that doesn’t quite reach
“Hey Barnes,” the brunet sighs, snatching up a beer bottle from the table by the couch, “how much of that did you hear?”

“Just the end bit...what do you mean Hammer cut corners?” Tony flops down onto the couch, patting the seat beside him and Bucky takes his cue to sit down next to the man. “You okay? That seemed...heated.”

“It’s actually why I asked you to come,” Tony starts, taking a swig of his beer and Bucky tracks the movement before looking away, focus, Barnes. “Remember when you told me that your Hammer prosthetic wasn’t only malfunctioning but hurting you?” Bucky nods, taking the proffered bottle of beer when Tony holds it out to him, “well as it turns out, it wasn’t just because of shoddy tech; Hammer’s been cutting corners making the prosthetics, which lead to the pain and malfunctions, the damn things were basically rotting inside of you.”

“I...I’m okay now though, right?” Bucky asks, heart in his throat because what the hell?!

“No- I mean yes, you’re perfectly fine now,” Tony immediately turns his body to face Barnes, placing a gentle hand on his right shoulder, and Bucky is helpless but to lean into the act of comfort. “I repaired the prothetic damage by replacing, well, everything, and Dr. Cho did her magic to fix the rest; thankfully you didn’t have the arm for too long at that point, but had you never changed it, I’m worried accidentally crushing the odd glass would have been the least of your worries...

“But that’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about, I meant to give you a bit more time to get used to the Stark prosthetic, get to a more comfortable place with your therapies, but it seems we don’t have the luxury of time anymore,” Tony sighs, hand squeezing Bucky’s shoulder one last time before pulling away, and Barnes mourns the loss. “It seems Hammer found out about my prosthetics line, I have no idea how- actually, J please find out how the fuck that dumbass found out about the prosthetics, thank you! Sorry, anyway, I know it’ll only be a matter of time until he finds out about the cases we’re building against him. After your surgery I collected the eroded tech, but I wanted to ask you first if we could use it in our case as evidence to get Hammer Prosthetics shut down; Jeri is heading the team that will go directly after Hammer Prosthetics, while my other team - Matt and Foggy, strange name, I know, who names their kid ‘Matt’?,” Bucky chuckles at Tony’s attempt at levity, and even if it’s a bit strained, Tony seems grateful for his reaction, “- are building up smaller cases of people Hammer fucked over, much like he did you.”

“You just wanted my permission to use the prosthetics?”

“Partly...” Tony trails, eyes searching Bucky’s face as he continues, “the contracts Hammer had all of you sign stated that you couldn’t sue them for prosthetic malfunctions, but it didn’t say anything about coming after them for the medical, psychological, and physical damages they caused; Dr. Cho, Xavier, and Lehnsherr are all willing to testify to those bits, but I...I wanted to ask if you’d be willing to testify to how the prosthetics affected your way of life...”

“I’ll do it,” Bucky cuts in, hearing more than enough, and if it meant no one else had to go through the daily pains - and dear lord long term effects that could have messed with Bucky’s health - and struggles then he’d do it; the prosthetic was supposed to give him - and so many others - a second chance, not kill them for a man’s greed.

“But you don’t even know what that could entail, Bucky, they’re likely going to attack every aspect of your life and...” Tony’s words die off when Bucky takes his hand in his, gently squeezing the warm calloused limbs in both his own.
“Tony, I’ve heard all I need to, you’re trying to stop Hammer from hurting more people, and I want to help however I can, and…” Bucky pauses, tongue darting out to wet his dry lips, meeting the older man’s eyes, “and more than anything, I trust you, Tony.”

Tony stares at Bucky like a lost puppy for a long minute, the silence in the penthouse almost it’s own sound, and Bucky fights the urge to break it with a lame joke or pun - he even gears himself up to lecture Tony’s ear off if the man tries to rebuke Bucky’s trust in him. However, what Bucky didn’t prepare for is exactly what happens; one minute Tony is staring at Bucky like he can’t even fathom him sitting there beside him, and the next? The next Tony lunges at Bucky and kisses him and- oh dear sweet Led Zeppelin please never let this end. It’s frantic, desperate almost, the way Tony clutches onto Bucky and kisses him, but truth be told Bucky was in no better shape. Though, to his heartbreak, Buck only just brushes his fingers against Tony’s jaw when the man suddenly jerks away as though struck, scrambling to the other side of the couch; Bucky blinks his eyes open, trying to register what the fuck just happened? before meeting Tony’s frantically wide eyes. The engineer plasters himself to the other side of the couch while his face seems torn between paling and flushing; one hand clutching the cushion as though to keep himself from reaching out, while the other hovers over his reddened lips as though he isn’t sure if he wants to touch them to confirm the kiss had happened, or wipe any trace of it away.

“Tony-” it’s at saying his name that a something seems to click behind Tony’s eyes, right before the damn of silence breaks.

“Fuck! Fuckfuckfuck Bucky I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean- I can’t- I’m so sorry! I don’t know what the fuck came over me, I didn’t mean to do that I just- FUCK!” Bucky holds his hands out placatingly, trying to calm the man down from the seemingly ramping up anxiety attack he’s about to spin out into, but before he can Tony’s words stop him in his tracks. “I’ve done a lot of shitty things in my life but the one thing I prided myself on was never being the reason for infidelity and I can’t-”

Okay, wait, what?

“Tony what are you talking about?” Bucky asks, but his words seem to go unheard by the frantic genius.

“-be the reason you cheat! I swore to myself that was the one thing I’d never do, I-fuck I’m becoming my father! Bucky I can’t-“

“Breathe Tony!” Bucky demands, voice loud enough to cut through the torrent of Tony’s thoughts, the man stops and takes a gulping - if wheezing - breath. “Okay, okay good, let's try this again; Tony, who, exactly, do you think I’m cheating on right now?”

“Steve!” Bucky’s pretty sure his brain blue-screens for a moment there, because there’s no way he heard that right, “I know you two are together, Bucky, and…and no matter what you two are going through, or what you think is okay to do, I can’t…why are you laughing?”

“Me and Steve?!” Bucky knows right now probably isn’t the best time to be cackling like some witch out of a Shakespeare play, but he just can’t help it; Tony thinks he and Steve are together?! “Tony, I swear to you I’m not with anyone right now, let alone Steve.”

“But…but the two of you…” Tony tries, but his words taper off, eyes searching Bucky for any fallacy in his words Bucky knows the man won’t find, because it was the absolute truth.

“Tony, aside from a little experimental phase in high school that lead to me realizing that I like dick, Steve fell on the very opposite spectrum; Rogers may be an ally, but he very much doesn’t swing our way,” Bucky chuckles, wiping a legitimate tear from his eye because of his laughter - that’s one way
to break the ice, I guess. “Hell, Stevie has an insane crush on out friend Peggy, she’s a hell of a lady and from what Sam and Nat tell me, she feels the same about him, but loves teasing the poor schmuck. Steve and I have known each other all out lives, we’re best friends, brothers even, and yes we love each other but it’s strictly platonic. I swear,” Bucky promises, watching a series of emotions play across Tony’s face before the man buries his face in his hands and groans.

“Well…this is embarrassing,” the brunet sighs, words muffles by his hands, “but Darcy’s words make a lot more sense now.” Bucky decides he’ll ask about that little bit later, but for the moment he watches Tony, slowly reaching across the couch to encircle the man’s wrist in his hand and gently pulls it away.

It’s now or never, Barnes.

“Tony, you’re a good guy, but I’d never cheat on my partner, if I had one,” he feels the need to add, treading carefully, “when you asked me here tonight, I was worried I’d done something wrong.”

“No, Bucky you haven’t-”

“I know, well now I do, but…I wanted to ask something of you myself,” Bucky breathes deep, feeling his throat click when he swallows, “I like you, Tony, I really do think of you as a friend but…but wanted to ask if you…if you might want something more, too?”

The silence is ironically deafening, the cold twisting Bucky feels in his gut makes him sick with nerves, but he put himself out there, and all there was left was to see what Tony would say. It was strange, how much lighter Bucky felt right then, despite his dread, head finally told Tony and it felt like a weight had been lifted - sure, he didn’t utter those three little words that had been rattling around in his head for far too long now, but it was still something. However, as the silence dragged on and Tony’s expressions seemed to go from relief to fear, Bucky genuinely didn’t know how this would all turn out; had he ruined this? Had he misspoke? Did Tony not feel the same?

“Bucky, I…” the singer feels his lungs burn, and forces himself to breathe, “I can’t be in a relationship, not…not now, not with everything that’s going on and- with everything going on, I’m sorry.”

Bucky wants to say it didn’t hurt to a blindly searing level deep in his chest, but it did, it really fucking did, and he’s had experience with blinding pain in his life. He almost releases Tony, ready to bow his head, apologize, and leave the man be. ‘If that man truly is as amazing and sad inside as you believe, then be with him,’ Erik’s words replay in his head, his own replaying on a loop, ‘because he has me’. Bucky’s grip on Tony’s wrist tightens fractionally, he’d said he couldn’t be in a relationship with everything that was going on, not never, and if Tony’s past with Stone was any indicator to his experiences with relationships, the man didn’t have the best track record of being with people who cared about him; ‘I’ll tell him as much, no matter how many times or how long it takes.’ Bucky knows it’s a bad idea, knows this won’t end well for him but…just the hint of Tony on his tongue was enough to leave him wanting - craving - more, and maybe…maybe if he could just have this little bit, it would be enough; it has to be.

“Then…then we don’t have to date, we can just- we can just be together, I know you think I’m attractive, even if just a little - don’t look at me like that, I’ve seen you staring, and also my own humility is battering me over the head for sound so egotistical right then - and Tony I think you’re fucking gorgeous, we can have fun together, be friends…friend with-”

“‘benefits’?” Tony cuts in, a flat look marring his usually expressive features, but the little twitch at the corner of his mouth gives him away, “because Kutcher and Timberlake didn’t already give us a play-by-play of how that works out.”
He was right, what the hell was Bucky thinking? It was a Hail Mary, but he wouldn’t push Tony if this wasn’t what he wanted, he deserved better than that.

“You’re right, it’s stupid, I’m sorry I…I shouldn’t have even suggested it,” Bucky sighs, finally releasing Tony and moves to stand, “you’re a good friend Tony, and I like being your friend, I hope I haven’t messed that.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t okay with it,” Bucky stills when Tony captures his prosthetic hand in his own, eyes darting from up at Bucky to the floor and back and basically anywhere else, but Barnes can’t look anywhere but at Tony, “I’m…I’m okay with it, the while ‘no strings attached’ thing, if you are?”

“I am,” there’s no hesitation in Bucky’s voice, no matter how dry and raspy they are, they aren’t hesitant because he does want this; wants Tony. There’s a gentle tug at his wrist and Bucky follows it down until he’s bent at the waist, face inches from the genius he could hardly ever take his eyes off of, and up close he could see that Tony’s dark eyes actually had a hue of hazel-green in them.

“I…I don’t take off my shirt,” Tony says, Bucky mourns the loss at the thought of not being able to kiss and touch the expanse of tanned skin hidden there, but Tony’s eyes brook no room for argument so Barnes doesn’t push.

“Whatever makes you comfortable, Tony,” Bucky answers as he carefully kneels onto the couch, never pulling away from Tony as he moves, knee settling in between Tony’s thighs and grins as the man shudders, pulling at Bucky’s wrist just a little more insistently.

“Thank you,” Tony whispers, the relief of Bucky’s acceptance of his condition a visible thing in the way his shoulders ease, and the way he reaches up to run his hands over the front of Bucky’s burgundy shirt - Bucky tamps down on the urge to meet anyone who every hurt Tony, and teach them a lesson or three, but right now, he focuses his attention on the man beneath him.

Barnes remembers thinking he’d take anything Tony gave him as he gently runs his finger tips along the man’s jaw, brushing his nose against the slope of his, and it’s only as their lips brush before pressing against one another that Bucky knows it’ll never be enough; he’d never have enough of this man, but this?

“Let me take care of you, doll,” Bucky whispers against Tony’s kiss-slick lips, the man beneath him pants gently and nods, the warm puffs fanning over Bucky’s mouth that stretches into a smile.

“Bucky…” Tony softly moans against his mouth, opening so sweetly for Bucky, clutching his Henley for purchase as Bucky deepens the kiss; this would have to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to all you lovely readers and commenters, hearing from you all makes me so darn happy to know you’re enjoying this story! I'll see you lovely people next time! xxoxoo

P.S. The German is courtesy of Google, so I apologize for any issues!
TRANSLATIONS:
Gut gemacht! = Well done!
Danke = thank you
aber ich glaube ich bin gerade gestorben = but I think I just died
Nein, dir geht es gut = No, you're fine
“You’re an idiot, I hope you know that,” Rhodey says into his glass of wine, taking a sip before sighing.

“I do, but right now Rhodey it’s the best I can do,” Tony says with a sigh of his own, swirling the burgundy liquid around in it’s fragile glass, “I like the guy, I really do—”

“But right now with everything going on, dating isn’t an option for me. Also, it’s flattering you think I look like the lovely Kunis, so thanks for that,” Tony finishes over his best friend’s words, polishing off his drink before its quickly refilled by a waiter, nodding at the man, “thanks Fitz.”

“No problem, sir,” the waiter says with an easy smile, Tony, Carol and Rhodey were regulars at this restaurant, coming whenever they were in town to catch up that the staff knew them fairly well by now. “Mack is back from his leave, he’s preparing your preferred dessert as we speak,” Rhodey says his thanks to the friendly waiter before picking up their conversation once he leaves.

“I get it, Tones, from what you told me it doesn’t seem like an easy situation, but that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to have something good in your life,” Tony is about to ask how Rhodey even knows about Barnes enough to consider him as ‘something good’, but his best friend seems to read him easily enough to answer his unspoken question. “Carol mentioned him and his buddy Barton, I…may or may not have looked them up in my free time, he’s an upstanding guy—”

“I believe that’s called stalking, Platypus,” Stark chides, but his friend continues undeterred.

“and I don’t think it’s fair to either of you to leave this as a casual thing, despite what the papers may think, I know you Tony, and you don’t do casual,” Rhodey finishes, just as Tony sees Carol leaving the restroom and heading back towards their corner table.

“Well, this time I do,” the Colonel looks about ready to argue when his girlfriend takes her seat beside him, her sharp eyes flitting between the two before they roll.

"Trying to talk sense into Tony about Barnes?” She asks casually, making Tony balk that his best friend had clearly been running his mouth, and sure Carol was his girlfriend but it was the principal
of the thing. “Well, despite what Rhodey thinks, I kind of get why you’re keeping him at arm’s length.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t agree with it, but I get it,” the blond reaches over and takes Tony’s hand into her own, giving it a gentle squeeze, “but Tony, Rhodey is right in believing this’ll hurt you more in the end, even if I understand you’re reasoning behind it. You’ve always been an ‘all or nothing’ kind of guy. We know you’ve been hurt by shitstains like Stone and Bain in the past because we were the ones who helped you get back on your feet, but Barnes seems to be a genuinely good person, and I’d hate to see you miss your chance because those assholes weren’t good enough for you, and I know Rhodey agrees with that too.”

“We wouldn’t even be entertaining the idea of nudging you towards him otherwise,” Rhodey says with a decisive nod, which Carol mimics then adds with a grin.

“And you know damn well I’d happily put him in his place like I did with Sunset at MIT,” Tony chuckles at the memory, to this day Bain’s nose was a little crooked after facing Carol’s wrath all those years ago.

“I…” Tony trails off and groans, rubbing at his forehead with his free hand, “I know you guys mean well, but…please don’t push this, because right now I honestly can’t commit to anymore more than a casual relationship and—”

“Tones, buddy, no,” Rhodey cuts in, taking his best friend’s free hand in his own, “the last thing we want is to pressure you into something you’re not ready for, all Carol and I are tryin’ to say is that we honestly believe you deserve better, and Barnes might be it, but whatever you decide, you know we’ll have your back.”

Stark rolls his eyes, and can be honest with himself to admit it’s to keep tears at bay, “thank you, really, I love you guys...even if you drive me crazy,” his chuckle sounding a little hoarse, but the duo grin and release his hands nonetheless, appearing satisfied with his answer.

“Oh please, after your dyed my hair pink during our senior year—”

“It was an accident!” Tony cries, only to get a napkin to the face courtesy of Danvers.

“It was picture day!”

The trio break out into a laugh that catches the momentary attention of a few patrons, but are left alone for the most part, their desserts are set in front of them not long after and the three dig in. Carol bumps Rhodney and lightly kicks at Tony’s shin to get his attention, nodding over to the retreating waiter and waitress that giggle and whisper to each other as they retreat.

“Okay, it’s official FitzSimmons has to be a thing now,” she chuckles conspiratorially, while Rhodey and Tony look at the duo in consideration.

“I don’t think it is, I mean Fitz looks like he’s seconds away from cardiac arrest his face is so red—”

“Simmons touched is arm! Dude they have to have finally gotten together, it’s been ages—”

“You know it’s creepy that you watch my waitstaff like they’re a live-action telenovela, right?” The familiar voice of Malinda makes the trio jump and duck their heads like guilty children, “though for your information, no, they aren’t dating…” May trails off, the three feeling genuinely upset their favorite pair haven’t finally gotten together, until the maitre d’ continues, “…though Fitz did try to
last month, right before he set his eyebrows on fire trying to light a Baked Alaska, Daisy was on ‘Eyebrow Duty’ until they grew back.”

This time their laughter reaches a level of hysterical that is enough to earn an eye roll from May as she walks away, and a lot more staring patrons, but the trio didn’t care; they do try to settle down - eventually - but it takes a while. A few hours later the three best friends go their separate ways after a few hugs and kisses, Carol leaving with Rhodey while Tony hops into the back of Thor’s awaiting car. He feels pleasant and warm as he chatters idly with the man, the taste of chocolate, wine and strawberries still lingering on his tongue. It’s been an…oddly pleasant few weeks, with his birthday now fast approaching this weekend, Tony doesn’t know whether to feel thrilled he won’t be attending it alone, or freaking out for that very same reason. Tony jolts back to reality when his phone buzzes, the smile it elicits in response so instinctual Pavlov would have been proud.

**Bucky - Today, 10:11PM: how’d dinner go?**

Fun fact: when Bucky found out he was still listed as ‘James Barnes’ on Tony’s phone, he threw a hissy fit that would have put Teen Tony to shame until Tony changed it, right before adding the dumbest (read: adorable) funny face as his contact photo. Tony may or may not have done the same in return, but on Bucky’s phone, he was listed as ‘Punk-Rock Steven Seagal’, because reasons.

**You - Today, 10:12PM: Pretty well, we have a betting pool on two of our favorite waiters getting together, so far Carol’s winning**

**Bucky - Today, 10:12PM: sounds fun haha**

**Bucky - Today, 10:13PM: why don’t I come over and you tell me about it?**

Tony grins at his phone, Bucky was many things but Tony didn’t think subtle was one of them, which was perfect because Tony was pretty horrible at reading between lines - just ask Pepper. Typing out a ‘hell yeah’ in response, he glances over to Thor when the man clears his throat, the rearview mirror showing just how much he was trying to stifle a grin.

“How was it everyone Tony hired wasn’t scared to give him shit? Must be Potts is doing, I’m sure of it.

“Nah, he’ll probably be there before I even arrive, and don’t make me tell Loki on you,” Tony grins and rolls his eyes, glancing out the window and tries for threatening, but can’t keep the fondness for the large man out of his tone, “you young people, so disrespectful these days.” Thor barks a laugh as he drives on, switching on the stereo to Tony’s usual playlist as they near Stark Tower, Tony felt giddy - always did - when he knew Bucky would be coming over.

If Bucky’s texts to Tony had been a surprise, then his near-daily visits were even more so, but… Tony enjoyed his company. Bucky never came to Tony’s unannounced, always giving Tony a heads up of when he was and wasn’t available, and only showed up once Tony had given him the go-ahead. To Stark’s genuine surprise they didn’t even have sex every time, sometimes Bucky would just come over, stake his claim on Stark’s battered workshop couch and work on his lyrics or play with the ‘bots (they’d even had pretty epic gaming sessions together, which Tony is still certain Bucky had to be cheating at, because no one was that good at Mario Kart), which should have probably set off red flags in Tony’s mind but it was…nice - so nice to not be alone that he couldn’t find it in himself to object. The more they hung out, the more he got to know Barnes, the more and more Tony realized how gone for the man he was. It was crazy to Tony, how even knowing the simplest things about Barnes, like his favorite color - red, ‘I knew I liked you for a good reason’
Tony had joked when he found out, telling him his was the same - meant the world to Tony; he’d never had anything so mundane but special before, and now that he did, it was so hard to imagine his life without it. They’d been ‘friends with benefits’ for less than a month, and in that short time Tony wished it were something more, something real...even if he knew that would never be a possibility.

The sex was mind-blowing, Barnes was both parts gentle and rough in equal measure, gaining as much pleasure in taking his partner apart bit-by-bit as Tony was; he was a gentleman through and through, at least, until Stark asked him not to be. He came apart beautifully for Tony in turn, never shy to ask for what he wanted, and trusted that Tony would give it to him - it went to Tony’s head, every time. In those moments he could forget about everything else, taking solace in Bucky’s arms as the world faded out around them, he was addicted and knew it - but the scariest thing was, Tony didn’t know if he’d ever be strong enough to turn the man away. Bucky respected Tony’s request to not take off his shirt when they did get intimate, never pushing for anything Tony wasn’t ready for, and only taking what Tony offered; it was always so startling to him, surprising him every time because it felt so nice not to have something taken without permission. Bucky showed up to every meeting with Jeri and her team for the case against Hammer, texted Tony at odd hours with the most adorable and dorky things Tony never thought was real outside of movies, and even helped Tony on his work for the Expo and prosthetic’s line. It was perfect, well…sort of.

Tony was still dying.

He knew he was stringing Bucky along, that he kept the man in the dark about what, exactly, he’d signed up for without even realizing it, and that…that wasn’t fair. Tony knew he’d have to tell Bucky, with the rise of the poisoning (BLOOD TOXICITY 42%, last he’d checked) in his blood and the spreading of the poison’s lines, he’d find out one way or the other, and Tony didn’t want Bucky to find out the hard way; the man was too good to be treated like that. However, Tony just…just wanted a little more time with Bucky, because he knew the man would turn tail and run once he found out, who wouldn’t? Tony thinks with a sigh, hand clutching at the phone in his grip, I’ll tell him after this weekend’s party, I…I have to, I owe him that much.

Something settles low in his stomach and coils as they turn into the parking lot. I don’t have much more time with him, Tony knew he wasn’t being fair to Bucky, the man had seen live combat, had seemingly forgiven Tony for his role in losing his arm and still stuck around; he wouldn’t run away from Tony because of a little poisoning…right? But, Tony was nearing Death’s door and who would want to stick around for that mess? Tony knew he was lucky his health was still well enough he could do things and care for himself, but the intervals between the need for new cores was steadily growing shorter and shorter, his body burning through them faster than teen fashion trends. Tony shakes his head, trying to clear it as he enters the elevator and heads to his floor; he knew he was nearing the end of the best thing he’d ever had, but…but damn it if he wouldn’t cling onto it until the very last second.

Stark rushes out of the elevator the second the doors part wide enough to let him through, eyes searching around for- Bucky, the man is lounging on Tony’s couch watching something on the TV Tony should be able to name, but right now, can’t. Barnes barely says his name before Tony all but throws himself at the singer, Bucky immediately catches him, hand gripping at Tony’s flanks once the man straddles him hardly ever pulling away from their kiss long enough for either to speak. However, Bucky eventually pulls himself away after several desperate moments of contact, Tony relents and pulls back enough to face him and catch his breath. Bucky’s thumbs rub circles at the skin above Tony’s waistband, that’s as far as Bucky would ever touch Tony’s torso once he realized Tony would get squirrelly if he tried to go higher up, so he never did - Tony didn’t even have to say anything the first time, Bucky had just noticed before pulling his hand away from where it travelled to just above his navel, kissing Tony’s chin and whispering ‘sorry’; never venturing higher than his hipbones since.
Tony swallows at the memory, staring down at that very same man who now stares up at him turn between want and worry, and it was strange how something so \textit{small} meant so damn \textit{much} to him. That night Tony had realized something, and it wasn’t some cataclysmic event that lead to the conclusion that whispered itself to life in Tony’s mind, but a simple act of kindness that seemed just \textit{so inherent} in Barnes it startled Tony every time; \textit{I love you}, were the words that trailed through Tony’s head over and over as he and Bucky had laid together that night. No, it hadn’t been a world ending event that lead to the realization, but to Tony, it felt just as significant.

\textit{I love him}, Tony says to himself, hands coming up to cup Bucky’s face and smiles despite the dry-strain he feels at the back of his throat, \textit{and I may lose him soon…please just…just give me more to remember you by.}

“Doll are you oka-” Tony silences the singer with a gentle kiss to his upper lip, thumbs stroking at the stubble on his cheeks, but can’t bare to pull himself away.

“I’m okay, Buck…I just…I want you,” the words felt weighted on Tony’s tongue, and a part of him was worried Barnes would easily read between them, but knows the thought to press leaves the man’s head when Tony rolls his hips and Bucky groans. “Take care of me, Buck…please just take care of me.”

“Anything you want, sweet thing,” the large man whispers, hands sliding down to Tony’s hips where they grip at his ass, then move to the tops of his thighs before pawing their way to his suit’s belt.

Tony knows his back will likely hate him tomorrow for choosing to do this on the couch instead of his bed, but he can’t bare pulling away from Bucky right then, can’t risk the man seeing where the tears gather at the corners of his prickling eyes. No, Tony buries his face into the crook of Bucky’s neck, mouth marking the man’s skin as though he’s allowed to do that (that for a short while people might think of Bucky as \textit{his}); his hands tug at the buttons at the front of Bucky’s shirt until the flannel parts open, allowing him access to the expanse of Bucky’s olive gold skin and hard muscle it stretches over. Working down to undo Barnes is jeans and moans when Bucky takes them into his strong grip, inhaling the scent of pinewood and soap and sweat that clings to his skin, mixing in with the growing scent of sex that wraps around them.

“\textit{Bucky,}” Tony mewls desperately, \textit{I love you}, he doesn’t dare say, but it’s there, right there at the tip of his tongue, and Tony bites down on the muscle until he tastes pennies.

“I got you, doll,” the man rasps, working their slick cocks together, hips rutting in desperation and Tony never wants this moment to end, “I’ll take care of you, Tony.”

Tony feels the ache behind his eyes intensify as he tries to hold back a sob, to blink away his tears so that Bucky will never know just how \textit{broken} the man he holds so tenderly truly is, because this is all they’ll ever have - all they ever \textit{can} have - and Tony doesn’t want to waste a moment of it. Their moans overlap one another, both growing more desperate as they chase their release with each other, bodies pressed tightly and hot as though they can meld into one being if they tried hard enough - somewhere in the back of Tony’s mind, worry that Bucky will feel the arc reactor blares, but right then Tony can’t bring himself to care.

“So gorgeous, so- \textit{oh shit} sweet thing you feel so \textit{good},” Bucky chokes out, hand moving faster around them, his prosthetic clutching at Tony’s thigh to the point of bruising, he’s sure, but Tony \textit{relishes} in the feeling.

“Bucky I- \textit{oh fuck!} Bucky, please don’t…don’t stop- \textit{yes!} Like that- \textit{oh fu-} I’m close please…” Tony’s words die off in a choked plea, breathing hot and heavy against the damp skin of the singer’s
neck as his body stiffens then trembles, Bucky biting at Tony’s shoulder only propelling the feeling of *too much* to near insanity and Tony looses himself in the feeling.

They fall over the edge together, Bucky just seconds behind the engineer who paints his release across the singer’s abs and onto his own dress pants, Bucky adding to the mess seconds later, and Tony ducks his head to see the mix of their shared release - some primal part of him howling at the site of their proved *pleasure*, the result of *them*. Tony lifts his head back to face Bucky, delving in for a kiss that boarders on the precipice of desperate and oh so tender. Tony knows this is all he’ll get, but he’ll still die happy knowing Bucky was *his*, even if only for a short while.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO much to all you lovely readers, commenters, and Kudos leavers! I appreciate each and every one of you! I’ll see you next chapter! xxoxoo

(For those of you that caught the Punk-Rock Steven Seagal reference, I tip my hat to you haha!)
Chapter Summary

Tony's birthday finally arrives, and with it, something unexpected....

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm SUPER sorry for the delay! Today was pretty hectic, and I'd clearly underestimated how ready this chapter was, but anyway here's the latest chapter, I hope y'all enjoy!

(P.S. I noticed that my computer had autocorrected 'Darcy' to 'Darcey' and went back and changed it, sorry about that!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony stares at himself in the mirror, the palladium poisoning now slowly working it’s angular spider-like limbs up to his collar bones, and sighs your time’s running out, Stark, he thinks to himself as he buttons up his dress shirt. Tony reaches for his Blood Toxicity Meter sat on his dresser, pricking his finger with little to no thought as he’d done for the past few months, the prick hardly even registering to him anymore (the things a person can get used to, he muses to himself); BLOOD TOXICITY 53% and Tony can’t help the lump he feels forming in his throat at the red letters that are slowly sealing his fate. Make it count, tossing the device onto the dresser he mindlessly reaches for one of his watches from his collection, absently thinking he should gift them to Rhodey in his will - Rhodes always loved watches, maybe it was an army thing, always wanting to know the time; at least with Tony’s watches Rhodey could do it in style.

“Tony, you’d better be ready,” Loki warns from the doorway, he was the new head of his personal security detail and on-again-off-again PA, the billionaire grins at the man through his mirror.

“I am Loki, don’t worry,” Tony chuckles, turning to face him, “no more grey hairs because of me, not today anyway.”

Since making Pepper CEO of Stark Industries, he’d assigned Happy to Pepper’s detail as he was the only person Tony honestly trusted to look out for her - and if it meant those two love sick puppies got to spend more time together? Well, hooray to happy happenstances. The green eyed man looks Tony over, sharp eyes taking in his crimson dress shirt and fitted black slacks, Tony was no slouch and knew how to dress to impress (and if there was a specific someone he was trying to impress tonight, well, that was his business and his alone), and knew he’d succeeded if Loki’s appreciative gaze was anything to go by.

Loki and Tony had met when he’d been to Switzerland on a business trip for S.I. a while back, the man had impressed Tony right away, taking no shit from the genius and giving just as good as he got; when Tony had offered him a job, Loki’s only condition had been ‘I will shave off your horrid beard if you even attempt to make my job harder’; Tony knew a good deal when he heard one and hired him on the spot.
“I checked the guest list, you know,” Loki starts, openly grinning at the genius as he moves closer, “Barnes plus eight? They couldn’t give their names? What did I tell you about making my job harder?”

“Trust me, Loki, the only mischief those kids’ll get up two is drinking too much, you know I’d never give you more than you could handle,” Tony teases with a chuckle, Loki rolls his eyes fondly (he knew if there was any real risk, the man would be tearing into him long before then, not teasing him; Thor must have told him about Bucky and his gang, he reasons), closing the distance between them the pale man snatches up his suit jacket from the foot of the bed and pats out the slight wrinkles before handing it to Tony.

“Lovely, just how I wanted to spend my evening, on babysitting duty,” Loki huffs and shakes his head, eyeing the ensemble critically before nodding - Loki may have been a bit of a fashionista at heart, but it’s likely why him and Pepper got along so well. “Your guests have arrived, and more are on the way, so why not use your charms on them instead of trying - and failing - to use them on me?”

Tony snorts, it’s an unattractive sound, but it’s worth the slight embarrassment for the way Loki smirks, “oh c’mon Loki, you know you love our little chats.”

Laufeyson rolls his eyes, slender arms folded over the barrel of his lithe chest, the gesture exasperated but ever so slightly fond, “ever the demanding brat, Stark.”

“You do know that I sign your paychecks, right?” Tony teasingly admonishes, his own grin undercutting any threat that might have been perceived - lord knows Loki probably had information to just about every bank account Tony owned.

“And you know that I have my eye on a rather blundering but adorable blond.”

Tony grins, brows flicking upward with interest, “how’s that going?”

Loki rolls his eyes once again, but this time his face softens far more than Tony’d ever seen it, the small grin that plays at his lips speaking volumes, “it seems Thor is far more oblivious than I originally through him to be.”

Reaching for the concealer on Tony’s dresser Loki pops off the cap, pouring a small dollop of the makeup onto his ring finger before dabbing it under the darkened skin of Tony’s eyes. It wasn’t the first time Loki played makeup artist, either; he’d done the same right before business meetings after Tony inevitably had to tell him about his little snafu with the druggie, but after a dressing down to be more careful in future - and minor freak out - the man kept the information to himself. However, it did result in Loki demanding Tony take self-defense lessons with Thor, and knowing Laufeyson, Tony’s pretty sure that was part of Thor’s punishment too - it’s been surprisingly fun for the duo, though they’d never admit as much, lest Loki believe his point hadn’t been made.

“Or maybe you just need to be more direct, some of us just suck at subtlety.”

Loki laughs, shaking his head, “yes, maybe a new ‘battle plan’ is needed, because that man understand subtlety as much as you understand proper decorum,” Loki moves back slightly, hands straightening out Tony’s jacket as he looks over his work on the engineer’s face, “though it seems you and Barnes have somehow managed to work things out, despite your horridness at ‘subtlety’.”

“How did you-”

“I’m the head of your security, Tony, and very good at my job,” the man cuts in with a sniff, “how
could I not know? Plus, it’s not as though his visits to your penthouse are exactly subtle, and the goonish grins he always had on his face upon leaving left very little in way of imagination for what you two got up to.”

“Fair enough,” Tony chuckles, eyes flickering over to his reflection in the mirror, eyeing himself for a moment. “I’m going to screw this up, Lo, with him I mean…I know it.”

“Blaspheme,” Loki scoffs and sets a hand on Tony’s shoulder, forcing the genius to meet his eyes. “Tony, in the months I’ve known you, ‘failure’ has never been an option - or part of your vernacular, for that matter - and I won’t let one of the few men I respect talk down about himself in such a manner, whatever plan you have in your head with Barnes, it will work out.”

“But-”

“It will work, Tony,” Loki’s tone brooks no room for argument, but it…it helps, strangely enough; the man’s staunch belief in Tony (as surprising as it may be) is enough to have him straightening his shoulders and breathe deep, I can do this. “Good, tonight is no time for a midlife crises,” Tony can’t help but bark a laugh at that, but to be fair, Loki wasn’t entirely off the mark, “if you would, Mr. Stark, your guess are waiting on your arrival.”

Tony follows Loki out of his bedroom and into the private elevator, down to the Stark Tower event hall where he’s met with thumping club music blaring out through the hall’s speakers, guests already chatting and dancing with each other in different areas of the hall. Tony doesn’t waste time, snatching up a champagne flute from the tray of a passing waiter, and downs half it’s contents before walking further into the party, greeting and thanking the people who pause their conversations to wish him a happy birthday - most of which Tony can hardly remember ever meeting, he notes, but doesn’t miss a beat in making them feel welcome regardless.

I need something stronger, Tony thinks feeling his nerves amping up, making his way towards the bar, not really as immersed in his own birthday party as he should be, and decides getting a little tipsy would solve that problem - it never failed him in the past, after all. It didn’t help that the one person he wanted to see seemed to be nowhere in sight; it never failed him in the past, after all. It didn’t help that the one person he wanted to see seemed to be nowhere in sight, he said he was coming, just...just give him a minute Tony, stop being so damn clingy. Downing a finger of whiskey, Tony orders another, and repeats the pattern until he’s holding his fourth glass, thinking he’s sufficiently warm enough to mingle (he didn’t want to face Bucky drunk, that would only lead to morose thoughts and Tony wasn’t about to let himself to be a downer on his final night with the man), when a hand claps him on the back.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” Dual voices bellow from behind him, making Tony jump and whip around only to burst into a fit of cackling laughter.

Right there are two of his best friends, to most they’d look completely normal (if a little underdressed for a party like this), until the person noticed their matching shirts. Rhodey and Carol’s otherwise plain shirts had a printed out photo on the front that immediately caught Tony’s eye; their first - horrifically - fun Mardi Gras as fresh-faced teens in their first year at university. Tony remembered that day like it was yesterday…well, to be fair it was a hard day to forget, no matter how hard they’d all tried at the time. He remembered that they’d drank every bottle of Ojen they could fined and scarfed down about half the offered donuts in the parade, Carol had nearly broken her leg trying to climb a ladder, Tony accidentally set fire to his mask but refused to take it off, and (after refusing to leave after getting a coconut to the face early on in the festivities) by the end of the parade Rhodey left with the title of ‘Beads Queen’ by his friends. However, for all the craziness, food poisoning, and horrid hangovers the morning after, it was one of the best days of Tony’s life; it was the day his first two friends at MIT turned into his best friends, and the picture showed just as much - they were covered in beads, confetti and other things they couldn’t name (even to this day), clenching donuts,
doubloons, and each other while grinning wildly at the camera.

*I can’t believe I almost forgot about that,* Tony thinks, already feeling his chest well up with nostalgia for their crazy antics at university as friends.

“Can you say best birthday present or what?” Danvers laughs, holding out a matching shirt for Tony to take.

“I thought we burned all the evidence of that day!” He says jokingly, before taking off his jacket and pulling the shirt over his head (Loki and Pepper would be horrified, Tony was excited to show them). “I love it, thank you guys,” Stark laughs, pulling them in for a hug.

“Knew you’d like it! Carol dug up even more pictures, like the one you took the second that coconut cracked me in the nose,” Rhodey laughs and Carol nods excitedly, pulling away to whip out her phone to show Tony, before scrolling over to the next image; Tony making out with a parade marcher, and if Tony’s memory was correct (and it always was), it was about less than ten seconds later that his mask was accidentally set on fire.

“One: send me these right now, and two: that parade dancer was very nice an-”

“He set fire to your mask!” Rhodey cackles, electing guffaws from the other two.

“Fair, but it was a total accident, he even gave me his beads as an apology and helped put out the fire just in time, he’s the reason my eyebrows only got singed!”

“That is true, what was his name again? Luke something? Howeling? Lor- wait, Logan! That’s it! Anyway, he was the one who helped us fined the Ojen, so I guess it was an even trade,” Carol chuckles, tapping away at her phone and Tony feels his own vibrate a few seconds later (several times, *good lord what other bits of it-should-have-been-forgotten history did she find?*), and claps a hand onto her friend’s back as she pockets the device. “We’re gonna try to find some food, see you a bit?”

“Sounds good!” Tony calls out over the music, waving at his friends before turning back to the bar and pulling his jacket back on, picking up his drink he wades his way through the crowd of people but stops once he sees a familiar face. “Clint!”

The drummer seems to hear Tony’s call because he turns towards him (*the aids are working better than expected if he could hear me over this cacophony,* Stark notes happily), nudging someone at his side to get their attention before nodding over at Tony, and it’s Bucky who turns to smile at him as he approaches their little group, “you guys made it!”

“Wouldn’t mist for the world man,” Sam chuckles, pulling Tony in for a hug, the rest following his lead (it still made Tony a little unsteady just how kind these people were, but it was nice, really nice; *I’ll miss them when this is all over*) with their own greetings until Tony reaches an unfamiliar brunette woman.

“Tony this is Margaret Carter,” Steve introduces, Tony taking the woman’s hand when she offers it.

“Please, call me Peggy, no one but my mother calls me Margaret,” the name is familiar for a reason Tony doesn’t understand, but it quickly clicks into place and he smiles at the beautiful woman - *she’s the one Bucky said Steve has a crush on,* and by the way Rogers seems to linger at her side, Tony knows it for a fact.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, I’m Tony Stark,” the woman’s blood-red lips twitch at his words, brow raising as she grins at Tony in a teasingly conspiratorial way, it’s an expression he doesn’t
understand until he suddenly does and bites back a laugh - ‘she feels the same about him, but loves teasing the poor schmuck’, seeing the way Steve fidgets and flushes adorably, he sees exactly what Bucky meant. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you Peggy, please, call me Tony.”

“And I’ve heard a lot bout you, Tony,” she replies in a smooth teasing accent, Bucky immediately face-palms, but Tony can see his cheeks reddening and finds it absolutely endearing - but there’s no way he goes a little red in the face, nope, no way because he’s nearly forty for chrissakes. Nearly-forty year olds don’t blush. Nope. Okay, fine, maybe he blushes a little, and can’t help but think so Bucky talks about me, huh? with a grin.

“It’s an open bar and the food’s already been served, feel free to help yourselves,” Tony addresses to Peggy and the group, Clint and Darcy had whooped in unison and rushed off the second Tony mentioned the words ‘open’ and ‘bar’ in the same sentence (they were like children, and Tony kinda loved that about them), Natasha and Phil quickly chasing after them. The remaining people laugh, and Tony takes the moment to turn to Peggy to and stage-whispers, if only to get a reaction out of Steve (okay, and maybe Bucky, too), “but you and I should chat soon, share the stories we heard about each other, sound like a deal?”

Both Steve and Bucky meet each other’s eyes, red-faced and wide eyed, Tony bites back a laugh but a giggle slips through, and Peggy seems to catch their reactions as well because she barks a laugh of her own; it’s loud, brash, and Tony sees exactly why Steve likes her so much.

“Deal!”

Steve offers Peggy a dance, or at least he tries to, if that’s was his red-faced rambling was supposed to mean, but Peggy seems to take mercy on him and drags him out not the floor regardless - Bucky smirks at Tony in a way that says ‘see, I told you, we’re just friends’, and Tony, like the total mature adult that he is, sticks his tongue out at Bucky in response. Sam hangs back for a while to chat with Bucky and Tony about the trip to Monaco, at least until he too was dragged away to the dance floor by a beautiful woman leaving Bucky and Tony alone, and dear Einstein why does Tony suddenly feel like an awkward teenager? It helps that Bucky doesn’t look much better, the man shifting from foot to the foot and paws at the back of his neck, teeth worrying at his lower lip as his eyes flitting to the floor, their surroundings, to Tony, and repeat.

Though, for all of the awkwardness between them, Barnes looked good; the man was dressed in fitted black slacks and a cornflour blue dress shirt, the sleeves were rolled up to just before his elbows exposing Tony’s sleek tech and Bucky’s homegrown gold skin and muscled forearm. A tantalizing bit of his throat and collarbones where were shown off where the top few buttons of his shirt remain unbuttoned, not enough to be tacky, but enough to have Tony seriously wondering how has no one pounced on him yet is beyond me, because lord knew Tony was seconds away from doing that very thing. C’mon Stark, you can do this, ‘playboy’ is literally part of your tagline, buck up and speak to that handsome Adonis or so help me-

“You look good-”

“I like your-”

They blurt out at once and stop just as quick, eyes meeting for a few moments before they begin giggling, and Tony decides to try again, “I’m not usually this awkward, I swear.”

“Neither am I, but…if you are, is that a good or bad thing?” Bucky teases with a twitch of his lips, Tony can’t help but roll his eyes and grin, because it was such a corny thing to ask and Tony couldn’t believe that his heart skipped, like, three beats because it was so damn cliché - he’s lucky I love him, otherwise I would have probably laughed in his face that was so corny—... goddamnit I
love him so damn much.

Stark takes Bucky’s hand in his own, the man seeming to relax at the contact, “I’d say it’s a good thing, I haven’t really had an awkward moment since I was…what? Twelve?”

“I like a guy who knows what he wants,” Bucky chuckles, gently tugging Tony to him, and the genius is helpless but to follow; Tony is about to lean up for a smooch but stops, the simple kiss becomes little more difficult what with the way Bucky’s jaw all but drops to the floor. “Is that RuPaul?!”

Tony barks a laugh and looks over his shoulder, sure enough, it is, “you wanna to go say hi, don’t you?”

Bucky looks about as excited as a kid in a candy store, he’s basically vibrating, Tony thinks with an amused huff, tugging the man through the crowded and towards his long time friend. From then it’s a blur of drinks, glitter, and Tony may have snapped a few pictures of Bucky, Steve and Darcy - who seemingly popped out of thin air - spazzing out over Ru. It was nice, though, seeing Bucky and his friends having actual fun, Pepper, Happy, Rhodey and Carol even join in on the little ragtag group’s antics before long - and if Pepper thinks Tony isn’t bringing up her doing shots with Carol, Matt and Natasha before the group brought down the house with their rendition of Hollaback Girl, she is sorely mistaken (who knew Murdock could sing?). At some point Bucky had managed to coax Stark out onto the dance floor, but Tony wouldn’t exactly call what they were doing ‘dancing’ so much as foreplay, but he wasn’t about to complain.

“Well, who knew you had moves?” Tony teases, rolling his hips and gently scratches at the hair at the nap of Bucky’s neck, feeling the man’s heart beating in tandem with the song’s beats between his shoulder blades where he’s pressed flush against Tony’s back; somewhere along the way Tony’d lost his jacket, but he didn’t mind, all the more to feel you against me, he inwardly chuckles.

“I’d say the same thing, but I’m starting to realize there really isn’t anything you can’t do,” Bucky whispers against his neck hands as his hands flex on Stark’s hip, teeth nipping at the skin just below his ear and Tony shivers; Bucky secures the genius against them as they move to the rhythm that pounds through the event hall’s speakers, and doesn’t dare let them wander apart.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Tony purrs and turns around in the man’s arms to face Bucky, pressing himself against the taller man’s front, lazily hooking his arms around the singer’s broad shoulders and pulling Bucky down towards him ever so slightly.

“Everywhere, huh?” Barnes whispers, face close enough to run his nose along the slop of Tony’s, the smaller man preens under his attention, grinning widely and unabashed, about to lean up to press a kiss to Bucky’s deliriously distracting mouth when the lights dim further and the music fades slightly.

“Can we get Mr. Stark to the podium please?” Loki’s familiar voice calls out over the speakers, is this payback? This has to be payback for something, Tony thinks with a whine, but does peck Bucky’s lips, finally.

“Cake time,” Tony sighs, for as much as he loves high-fructose corn syrup in the form of fluffy desserts he loves making out with Bucky more, but knows Thor will likely bodily drag him away under Loki’s orders if he doesn’t get a move on soon - cockblocking jerks, he thinks with a pout. “See you in a bit?”

“Of course,” Bucky ducks down for another quick peck, groping the swell of Tony’s ass as he does, grinning against the genius’s lips when he yelps and laughs, “I’ll go hunt down the other Goonies,
meet you at the bar afterwards?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Tony remains in Bucky’s arms for a little longer, eyes locked onto one another as neither move, “don’t let the Fratellis catch you until then, got it?” Tony warns as Barnes laughs, promising he’ll stay on his toes, and with another peck to Bucky’s lips (one last kiss for the road, Tony tells himself), he pulls himself away and heads to the little podium at the front of the hall where Pepper and Happy, Thor, Loki and Luke stand around his cake.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Stark,” Laufeyson whispers as he hands him the mic, Thor and Luke clapping him on the shoulders, each with a smile of their own that doesn’t fail to make Tony grin as well.

“Thanks guys,” he whispers, ducking his head to accept Pepper’s kiss on the cheek, and hugs the woman as tightly as he can without suffocating her, doing the same to Happy when the man pulls him in for a bear hug.

“Hello lovely humans,” Tony greets, finally turning towards the gathered crowed. “I think by now, you all know how fond I am of talking,” the crowd chuckles and so does Tony, keep it short and sweet, he tells himself, “but I won’t keep you long, there’s a lot more partying to do and a world record to break,” a whoop! sounds from someone in the crowed, and Tony doesn’t even have to guess who that might be. “I want to thank all of you for coming today, this year has been, well, for lack of a more eloquent term; pretty shitty, but seeing you all here having fun and taking a break from the world with me definitely makes up for it…” Tony trails off, short and sweet, keep it short and- a particular set of diamond colored eyes meet his and Stark can’t find it in himself to look away, and instead finds himself speaking without much thought.

“This year has been an unexpected rollercoaster, but I wouldn’t change it for the world,” which is a odd thing to say, odder when he realized it was the absolute truth, “I’ve met amazing people this year who have changed my life for the better, and grew closer to those that have always been there for me, even when I didn’t realize it,” Pepper reaches out to take his free hand in hers, giving it a gentle squeeze in comfort, which Tony appreciates more than she’d probably ever know.

“I want to say I have regrets, but ultimately, I don’t; would I go back and change things? Of course, who wouldn’t? But as it stands…” Tony feels his throat tighten and tries clearing it as subtly as he can; he’ll lose this, all of this soon enough - it’s not something he hasn’t admitted to himself time and again already, after all. However, seeing Rhodey and Carol grinning up at him, feeling Pepper’s hand in his and Happy at his side; knowing he’s surrounded by friends new and old, and is staring at the first person who not only treated Tony as another human, but as more; the person Tony is in love with, how can he say he ‘regrets’ any of this?

“As it stands, all I can say is thank you, to each and everyone of you,” Tony smiles at Bucky, the man grinning back at him, unabashed and warm, “and here’s to another amazing year, no matter how batshit it may be.”

Tony hold up his mic for a toast man it’s hot in here, he thinks while everyone raises their drinks and claps, moving Tony takes the knife from Thor and slices into the cake eliciting more cheers, and hands off the cutlery to Odinson and Cage to finish divvying up the cake for the guests - bodyguards that double-up as cake elves, Tony really does have the best team. Tony tells Loki to figure out why it’s so hot, waving off the man’s questioning look and hops off the podium, thanking the people that come over to wish him a happy birthday, but only has one goal in mind; find Bucky.

His little epiphany on stage made him realize something; he was dying, sure, what else was new? But he didn’t have to die unhappy, and so much of that not only had to do with those that surrounded him, but with Bucky. If this month with Barnes would be all he had, it was still something, and he’d cherish it no matter what - even if this ended with Bucky wanting nothing to do with him, he was
thankful for the time they had together. *I have to tell him, I owe him- goddamn it I owe myself that much! Stop hiding, Stark, stop hiding and do this!* Tell him. Tony steels himself as he makes his way towards the bar, ordering a drink (water, this time, his mouth was little dry after all that) that he only *just* finishes when Bucky arrives with a piece of cake, setting the thick slice of fluffy gooey goodness beside him.

“Did you mean all that?” Stark turns to see the man leaning his elbow onto the bar, could-colored eyes on him searching for something, and Tony nods watching the barely-there smile turn into something blinding and gorgeous.

 Tell him.

“I did,” Tony says with a smile of his own, turning to properly face the man he takes a deep breath, and presses on. “Bucky, can we go somewhere private? We really need to-” a wet finger against his lips halts Tony’s words, and what the hell- wait…that’s frosting.

“Bad luck for the birthday boy not to eat his cake,” Bucky says with a shiteating grin, Tony stares at him dumbfounded for a few seconds, before doubling over in laughter.

“I don’t think I ever heard that before,” Tony teases as he straightens up, fixing out his wrinkled shirt and tugs at the collar a little, why is it getting hotter?

“It’s totally a thing- *holy shit Tony,*” Bucky’s voice squeaks when Tony takes his hand and slips the digit into his mouth, tongue wrapping around his finger and works the frosting off with a little more…*finesse* than is probably warranted, but it’s *totally* worth it for the way Bucky’s eyes darken and his lips part. “You’re gonna be the death of me, you know that?” Tony chuckles after releasing him, wiping at the corners of his mouth.

 Tell him.

“Trust me, I don’t think that’s an immediate risk for you right now,” Tony groans and pulls off the shirt Carol and Rhodey gifted him, it’s the layers, that’s why you’re so heated, “but on that point, we *really* need to talk, Bucky. I need to tell you some-” Tony stops, that’s not…something’s not right.

“Tony? Tony are you okay? What do you need to tell me, doll?” Bucky straightens, about to reach out for Stark when the man jolts and stumble back, no, not now! Ohfucknonono! “Tony what’s-”

“I-I have to go,” is as much as he manages out before barreling through the crowed, the blood rushing to his head and the sudden searing pain in his chest makes apologizing for jostling his guests near impossible, his shortening breaths aren’t helping matters, either. “Work…shop, J,” he rasps after throwing himself into the elevator, my skin feels like it’s on fire, he only *just* catches a glimpse of Bucky breaking through the crowd before the doors close.

JARVIS runs through the statistics on his heart rate and blood pressure, giving him an estimate on how much longer the core will last before he goes into cardiac arrest, *not now! Not now please not-*the elevator seems to move fast enough to nearly knock Tony down onto his knees. Stark felt like his head was spinning, like it was about to whirl right off his damn shoulders. *Breathe, for the love of Gods breathe, Tony!* he yells at himself, trying to suck oxygen into his burning lungs through what feels like a fucking *straw.*

The doors rip open and Tony stumbles into his workshop, his own birthday responsibilities forgotten as his heart beats double time in his chest, his *throat,* but suddenly everything stops. He’s pretty sure he hears JARVIS calling out to him, the AI almost sounds like he’s *begging* him for something, which is strange-* when was the floor this clo- oh, ow…that hurt.* The palladium poisoning he feels
crawling up his neck is a cold so bitter it burns, coating his tongue and molars in something acrid and nauseating, *the desk is right there, just, just MOVE STARK!*

Panic grabs hold of him and pins him to the floor, throttling him with unforgiving anxiety, all of this far too similar - Stane ripping his arc reactor from his chest and laughing; the rough hands tearing into him, *beating* him, and holding his head under water in the cave - but this time he knows no one will be coming to save him, this time he can’t even save *himself*. Tony’s chest seizes, his body spasming on the cold floor of his workshop, and he wanted to *scream* because this *wasn’t* how it was supposed to happen! He was supposed to have *more time!* He sees the bots rushing over to him, he can’t remember the last time he wished so *badly* he could reach out to touch them, and can only just make out the blurry outline of Dum-E’s claw extending towards him through is dimming vision before everything goes black.

*This can’t be how it happens*, he hears the bots beeping in distress, *knows* they’re calling out to him and *wishes* he could tell them it’ll be okay, but he can’t, *not now, not... not like this...please.*

Chapter End Notes

*Hides under my Avengers blanket* Don't kill me! I love you all!!!!

Wheew that was intense huh? I'm evil, I know, don't worry a friend told me as much when I told her what my plans for this chapter were and her response was, and I quote "you're Satan, if I were a reader of yours, I'd throw my shoe at you." Ha! Anyway, I'm SUPER sorry again for the late update, updates will presume as normal so don't worry! I wanted to thank everyone again for reading and your lovely comments, they mean so much to me!! All that said, I'll see you all next chapter!! xxoxoo
Together

Chapter Summary

The night it all comes to a head, and the aftermath that follows...

Chapter Notes

*Pokes head out from under Avengers blanket* Hello again! After the last chapter I looked this one over again, and ended up putting it through some heavy editing, not happy with the direction Past Me wanted to take it; least to say, I hope it'll pay off! But enough from me, onto the story! xxoxoo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say Bucky was nervous for Tony’s birthday party was just scratching the surface, it was like saying Ozzy Osbourne ‘knew how to put on a show’: you weren’t technically wrong, but you were still pretty far off from something way more accurate. Bucky had stared at the present he’d gotten Tony that now sat on his dresser, and somehow the little flat rectangular box stared back at him; he knew it was silly to get a billionaire a Star Trek charm bracelet - Tony could probably buy the rights to everything Star Trek related if he wanted - but his clear childlike love for the franchise had Bucky pausing in the department store anyway. It had been one of the few times over the month they’d spent together that Tony opened up about his past, telling Bucky how as a kid he, Jarvis and his wife Ana would gather around the TV to watch the show, and remembering the happiness he’d seen in Tony’s eyes had Bucky marching in to the store to buy the little trinket - it’s so stupid, he’ll laugh at it, no doubt, but that right there is what made Bucky smile as he forked over the cash and requested it be wrapped, he’ll see it and laugh. Bucky adored Tony’s laughs.

The singer had frantically paced around his apartment enough he’s sure he wore a hole in the flooring, and if it wasn’t for Sam and Steve bodily dragging him out of his place, Bucky’s sure he would have changed into a fourth outfit and still found it lacking. After Steve had not-so-subtly shoved him into the backseat with Sam, Bucky rested his head back against the carseat, and tried breathing through his anxiety. This past month with Tony had been more than Bucky could have ever hoped for, yes, the sex was fantastic - Bucky really hadn’t expected anything less from the already talented man - but just the time he got to spend with Tony had the singer aching for something more. It was selfish, Tony said it himself, he can’t do relationships with the mess of Hammer Tech and responsibilities for his own company, but just seeing how happy Stark seemed to be around Barnes had the man hopeful that maybe…maybe this thing between them could be a little more…exclusive. It'll be okay, this'll be a fun night and everything will be okay, Bucky tells himself on a loop until they walk through the doors of the Stark Tower event hall.

The party had been amazing right from the get go, from A-list Hollywood celebrities to pop-culture icons, it was intimidating, sure, but still pretty awesome - Bucky gave himself points for not spazzing out as blatantly as Darcy and Clint had, though, he couldn’t exactly blame them (especially after spazzing out over RuPaul). However, when Bucky had seen Tony everything else had just faded into the background; the man was gorgeous, smart as hell, witty and just perfect, and Bucky couldn’t tear
his eyes away. Tony being so comfortable around Bucky gave him a little courage, feeling the present sitting heavy in his slack’s pocket, but when Tony had brought up going somewhere a little more private, Bucky had been torn; ‘talks’ weren’t just cliché stuttering points in rom-coms for no reason, but if something was wrong Tony would have told him by now, so Bucky had been ready to agree - already reaching into his pocket for the little bracelet - when everything suddenly changed.

Chasing after Tony was a knee-jerk reaction; the man literally went from a gorgeous golden tan and flushed cheeks to pale as death right in front of Bucky within seconds, how could he not go after him, out of his mind with worry? Even JARVIS is tone set Barnes further on edge, feeling jittery in the elevator as it moved towards the genius is workshop, the AI trying to speak in roundabout ways that Tony wasn’t well but Bucky needed to keep a cool head. When the elevator doors slide apart, Bucky was met with the darkened workshop and internally cursed, where’s Tony?

“Sir is in his workshop, but Mr. Barnes, please, hurry,” JARVIS urges, the AI almost sounded…scared, and Bucky moves further in to the vacant workshop with his heart pounding in his ears.

Poking his head around the machinery in search of Tony Bucky finds nothing and calls out again, but with every passing second he wonders if the AI had just lied to him to protect its inventor, though it made no sense because JARVIS never had any qualms about telling people when to fuck off - granted in a more eloquent manner than that - so why would he fib now? However, Bucky’s steps falter when he hears a ragged gasp in the direction of a desk, breaking out into a dead sprint towards the sound, and feels his heart all but stop in his chest at the prone form on the floor.

“TONY!” Bucky screams out, slamming onto his knees beside the man and gingerly reaches out to turn over and cradle the genius in his arms, Tony groans over being jostled but curls towards him anyway, “I’ll call an ambulance just-

“No! No….” Tony weakly pleads, hand pawing against Bucky’s shirt where his pallid face presses against him, he’s so pale, he can’t even take a full breath, what’s happening?! Barnes worries frantically, cupping Tony’s hand where it clutches his shirt in a trembling fist. “Desk, my…my desk drawer, there’s a box-” the engineer forces out, cut off but a painfully dry coughing fit, and lets go of Bucky’s shirt only for it to fall limply to the floor.

“Stay with me, Tony,” Bucky pleadingly whispers, looking up at the desk Tony had collapsed beside, only now noticing Dum-E stood behind it trying to reach for something, but fails because of his thick claws, “it’ll be okay, stay with me, doll, I’ll take care of you.”

Bucky gently sets Tony down before doing as the man had asked, the bot beeps at Bucky when he stands beside it, the simple sound somehow sounding pleading, scared and frantic all at once, and Bucky quickly runs a reassuring hand alone the bot’s claw before ripping into the desk drawer. The box is easy to find, it’s a thick sleek cherry wood, sturdy but otherwise undiscerning in a high tech workshop like this. Reaching for the box with trembling hands, Bucky forces himself to breathe as he pushes back over to Tony’s side, but finds himself clueless as to what he should do next, and tries to clear the blood rushing to his ears in panic, you’re no use to him if you start panicking, get it together soldier! It’s when Tony weakly tries undoing his shirt that Bucky catches on and rips the damn thing apart and-

what the fuck?! Bucky’s heart sinks further as he stares down at the mess of jarring jagged scars on Tony’s chest, black lines inching their way across his skin (almost to his neck), and in the middle of it all lays a device embedded in his chest glowing pale blue - it flickers, only for a split second, but the panic Bucky feels only eats further away at his tenuous grip on anything resembling ‘calm’.

“Tony,” Bucky gasps, his voice catching as he stares down at the man’s chest, suddenly petrified. “I-
“I don’t know what to d-”

“I need you…Bucky, please,” Tony manages out and Bucky nods, the man looks a little relieved at that, “help me up,” and Bucky quickly - but carefully - does just that, propping the man’s back up against his chest.

Tony moves slowly and as steadily as his quivering hands will allow, Bucky watches over Stark’s shoulder as he works with weak hands to take the device out of his chest, and Barnes forces himself to bite back a gasp; this is why he’d never take off his shirt, he never wanted me to see this. A the smoking and degraded chip is pulled out of the device from Tony’s chest and tossed aside, reaching out for the box Bucky had brought and the singer slides it closer to him, helping Stark open the box is lid and stares at the multitude of chips ready for use; it's halfway empty, Bucky notes, how long has this been happening? Bucky wants to ask, but Tony can hardly take a full breath, so his questions would just have to wait. It’s almost as though it’s all happening to someone else, watching himself hold Tony while he works like an outsider looking in, and Bucky fights back the bile he feels rising in his throat. Tony secures the new chip into the device before setting it back in his chest, the machine clicks back into place and Bucky hears a faint but unmistakable hum from it, and it’s almost as though he’s the one saved from a heart attack when Tony gasps, raspy but deep.

“Tony,” he croaks trying to blink back tears, Bucky encases the older man in his hold, resting his forehead against the crook of Tony’s neck, “doll, what-”

“I’m dying,” Tony grits out, body trembling like a leaf fighting the Autumn wind, but he doesn’t try to pull from Bucky’s hold on him - though it’s clear Tony won’t turn to look at him. “I’m dying Bucky, the arc reactor it’s…it’s keeping me alive but slowly poisoning me, I don’t know how much time I have left but…I’m dying, that much is guaranteed.”

“No,” Bucky whimpers, his voice a foreign and weak sound even to his own ears, wishing Tony would just turn around and look at him. “No there has to be-”

“You should leave,” Tony cuts in, voice blank of any emotion, and Bucky feels like screaming.

“Just leave, Bucky.”

“Tony-”

“Leave, Barnes,” Tony cuts off coldly, and Bucky feels his throat constrict, threatening to strangle him. “Please just…just leave.”

Bucky wants to fight Tony, wants to hold the man and never let go, and yet he finds himself pulling away and standing on unsteady feet. He can’t force himself to stay, not when Tony clearly doesn’t want him here, and it hurts. Bucky stares down at the back of Tony’s head for silent few moments, searching for something as his temples ache and his vision begins to blur; something, anything from Tony to tell him the man actually wants him to stay. He finds nothing, nothing but Tony’s still back facing him (a part of Bucky wonder’s if he’s even breathing, he’s so still), so - like the coward he knows he truly is, has always been - Bucky leaves. It’s just as the elevator doors slide shut that he hears a choked off sob, and Bucky doesn’t know if it’s from him or Tony.

Tony Stark is dying.

To think it was one thing, to say it was another, but to see it? Bucky only just makes it to the bathroom before he throws up after the realization hits him for the millionth time, feels his heart
dropping to the floor all over again, and his head spines. The images of painful scarring and black lines of poison flashing behind his eyes every time he closes them, his stomach spasms and his body tenses, but there’s nothing left in him to reject. Bucky rests his sweaty forehead against the lip of the toilet, he knows he should stay away from Tony after what he’d done (after how’d he’d left), but he couldn’t, now more than ever all he wanted to do was run to the man and cling to him. But how could he after running away from Tony? He’d just left him there, and that was unforgivable; Bucky had been right all along, he didn’t deserve Tony.

Bucky feels like shit, he wasn’t sure how he’d gotten back home, but he’d spent the night drinking until he passed out, as though that would erase the reality that Tony was dying; you left him alone, he told you he was dying, and you left him alone. Bucky tells himself he’d just did what Tony had asked, but knows himself better than that, knows that we was just being a coward. Tony was sick and he was dying. Everything hits him then, the offhanded comments about death, Tony ‘needing to make things right’; Tony paling, disappearing (likely to change that chip in his chest) and reappearing looking better, and why Tony always seemed more than willing to give almost everything away - despite what the ancient Egyptians believed, worldly possessions followed no one into death, and Tony seemed to be very well aware of that fact. He thinks back to a conversation with Tony when the man had been working on his arm, Bucky had marveled over his muscle car collection, and Tony had asked if he wanted any of them; at the time Bucky had laughed it off as a joke, but now, he knew if he’d said ‘yes’ Tony wouldn’t have denied him. How fucked was that? Tony had clearly cared for those cars, given the amazing shape they were all in, and would have given it to Bucky without hesitation - he bites back a sob at the thought, he knew, all this time…why?

Because he knew you’d leave, and you proved him right, a voice whispers in Bucky’s head and he flinches at the coldness of it, the man presses the sleek metal of the prosthetic into his thigh until the pain is all he can focus on. He told me to leave, those words fought Bucky all night long, over and over again, there had been moments where he screamed into his bed’s pillows until he was hoarse that Tony was the one who told him to leave, but each time he’d sit back and choke on a sob regardless, because he knew, “I never should have left him…why did I leave him?”

I was scared. I was scared and I ran away, Bucky presses his forehead down onto the toilet seat until his skull throbs, yes, you ran and left him alone. The warring sides ate away at Bucky’s waning sanity, but he was too weak, too scared to go back; what if Tony kicked him out? What if Tony said he hated Bucky for leaving? Barnes wouldn’t even be able to fight him on it either, he hated himself, but if he heard those words from Tony he knew, knew it would break him-

“Man you look like shit,” Clint says from the bathroom entry way, leaning against the frame as he stares down at his friend, it was only then Bucky remembered they were supposed to meet up the day after Tony’s party to go over a few songs, what time is it? “When you ghosted on us last night we thought you’d be spending the night with Stark, but Nat said she saw you leaving the tower.”

Bucky pulls himself away from the toilet, flushing down the bile before brushing his teeth and washing his face, and meets Clint’s gaze through the mirror, “I messed up, Clint.”

The drummer raises a brow, about to speak when Steve’s reflection joins Clint’s, “Buck are you okay?” The blond asks, voice almost gratefully kind. He doesn’t want to say it, doesn’t want to admit Tony’s confession aloud (what he’d done), as though that’s the only thing that’s keeping everything from being real. “Bucky?” Steve says again, coming over to his best friend, and it’s the gentle hand on his shoulder that finally breaks him.

“He’s dying, Stevie,” Bucky chokes on a sob, he’s immediately turned around and pulled into Steve’s large chest, clutching onto his best friend, rasping out, “I fuckin’- I can’t… I can’t believe this
is happening, it can't be-…he’s dying!”

Steve goes still, the comforting circling of his hand at Bucky’s upper back slowing, “he told you?”

It takes only a second for Bucky’s mind to snag on the words, it would have flown past him had it not been for the blond’s phrasing, the way he sounded relieved, like someone who was finally not alone in knowing something horrible. No, no there’s no way-

“You knew?” Bucky yanks away from Steve, staring at his best friend’s face before staggering back, his heart suddenly pounding nauseatingly loud in his ears, “you knew?!”

The guilt on Steve’s face looks like it had been eating away at him for a long time, and if Bucky wasn’t so heartbroken, or maybe is he was just a better man he would have cared, “he said he didn’t tell anyone, made me promise not to say anything-”

It happens before Bucky even realizes he’s moved, the cracking of skin on skin echoing through his apartment, Steve’s head snapping to the side and Bucky can’t find it in himself to be sorry. Clint’s on him in an instant, dragging Bucky away from doing any further damage he’s likely to regret (later, anyway), and Bucky vaguely thinks Clint’s probably right in doing so (not right then, anyway).

“You knew all this fucking time and didn’t tell me anything?!”

“Bucky calm down,” Clint warns, bodily dragging him over to his living room’s couch, “breathe and calm the fuck down, Steve said Tony told him not to say anything, and if the guy’s dying it’s his right to the privacy.”

Bucky presses his face into his palms, groaning and gasping through the tears that burn his eyes and stream down his face unbidden, because Clint was right but for a fleeting second he was glad to shift his anger onto something other than his own cowardice. It wasn’t fair, using his best friend as a scapegoat to his own self-loathing, but just one second of forgetting that Tony - the nerdy Trekkie with a heart bigger than the world itself, and the man Bucky was in love with, his Tony - was dying and that Bucky had left him alone.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Bucky sniffs, wiping his eyes, “I just- fuck.”

“I’m sorry too, Buck,” Steve says, ever the forgiving one between the two of them, “wanna tell us what happened?”

Bucky swallows past the lump in his throat but nods, needing to tell someone, and spills his guts to his two best friends. He tells Steve and Clint everything from the hate he felt towards Tony when they’d first met, to realizing he was so gone for the man it was boarding on pathetic, and finally tells them of the events of last night. The silence in the room is stifling, Bucky doesn’t feel any lighter after the confession, if anything he feels worse; after everything Tony had done for him, Bucky just up and left the man when he’d needed him most - no matter what Tony said, Bucky knew he should have stayed.

“You fucking coward,” Clint grits out after a beat, glaring at his friend, expression almost murderous.

“Clint-” Steve starts, warning, but Barton presses on.

“No Steve, Bucky’s being a fucking coward, Tony’s dying and he just leaves? That isn’t okay whatsoever and you know it!” At that, Steve jaw goes taut but he says nothing, and Bucky can’t blame his friend because he knows it’s true. “And you, if you really do care for him, you wouldn’t fucking be here, Barnes!”
“But I…I don’t know what to do Clint!” Bucky tries, weakly, only to be silenced with a single look - it was always so jarring to see Clint angry, he was usually the epitome of goofy nonchalance, so these moments were rare but never unwarranted.

“Shut the fuck up and grow up Bucky, I get it, you’re scared and that’s fine - it’s natural - but if you’re this scared imagine how Tony feels. You have us to lean on, and right now, if what Steve said is true about no one knowing, he has no one.”

Bucky is suddenly - incongruously - sick with himself right then, because Clint was right and hearing his own thoughts spoken aloud only reinforces it; Tony was dying and alone and he’d just left him. He’s a monster. A coward that didn’t deserve someone like Tony, but fuck if he wasn’t selfish enough to want the man anyway. A fresh wave of nausea and sadness threatens to overwhelm Bucky, blinking rapidly to keep fresh tears from spilling over his raw cheeks; he has to fix this, has to. Bucky didn’t care what it took, but he has to fix this.

“I know that look,” Clint says, voice drastically kinder than moments ago, and Bucky looks over to his friend when he feels a hand squeeze his forearm. “I’m proud of you, Buck, now go get ‘em.”

Bucky’s on his feet within seconds, pausing long enough to snatch up the present he’d tossed onto the dining room table the night before, and rushes out of his apartment with his heart in his throat and a prayer that he hadn’t messed this up beyond repair.

Everyone leaves, Stark, Tony’s mind whispers, and the mechanic screws his eyes shut, wishing the damn thing would just shut up, just this once. You knew this was coming. Tony curls in on himself in his bed, hand resting over his arc reactor as though the damn thing would give him any semblance of comfort, Bucky left him, but he’d told him to leave, hadn’t he? Barnes wasn’t at fault for doing what Tony had asked, and yet he felt selfishly - childishly - angry at the man for leaving, anyway. Tony wanted to scream, to cry, but all he felt was numb, and that made him feel even more sick than any amount of palladium poisoning ever could.

“Sir?” JARVIS is soothing voice softly speaks, catching the mechanic’s attention, “there’s someone here to see you.”

“Tell them to go away,” Tony rasps, wrapping his duvet tightly around his shoulders.

“They’re insisting, Sir.”

“Well tell them to fuck off, JARVIS!”

“No can do, doll,” a voice says, and the familiar sound alone makes Tony’s weak heart skip a beat, jolting up right to stare disbelievingly at-

“Bucky?”

The two men stare at each other, neither willing to break the silence, but Tony doesn’t stop Barnes when the man steps further into his room; doesn’t stop him Barnes when he toes off his shoes and crawls onto his bed; doesn’t fight back when Bucky tentatively pulls Tony into his arms.

“I should never have left last night, and for that I’m sorry,” Bucky says after a moment, voice shaking ever so slightly, and Tony knew he would have missed it had the room not been so oppressively silent. “I’m so sorry, Tony.”
“I told you to leave-”

“But I shouldn’t have,” Bucky’s arms hold him tighter, “I was a coward to go…never should have
left you, doll…not when you clearly needed me to stay. I’m so sorry, Tony.”

Tony swallows thickly, limp against the larger man, “but I’m-

“I know, you’re…you’re dying.” Tony doesn’t think he imagines the way Bucky’s voice cracks
slightly at the admission, “but I still want to be here, I know I messed up bad last night, but I want to
stay with you but only if…if you’ll have me.”

“I can’t stop it from happening, Bucky…I tried everything.” Tony whispers, still not actually
believing Bucky was here, holding him; because it’s too good to be true, and Tony was too scared to
blink, to let go of the man, fearful that he really was just imagining the singer here with him.

“We have a lot to talk about, a lot to figure out, but I’m not leaving you again, doll,” it’s when Bucky
shifts to pull away from Tony that the genius finally clings onto him, not wanting this - him - to leave
just yet, not again, but Bucky doesn’t leave; instead he pulls back just enough to stare down at Tony,
“I don’t care what happens,” he kisses his forehead, and presses his own against Tony’s, “but we’ll
figure this out, together.”

Tony wants to tell him he isn’t a coward but that he’s stupid, that this will only hurt him in the end
because Tony will be dead, but when Bucky leans in to kiss him Tony relents and kisses back; it’s
terribly, awfully innocent, and Tony wouldn’t have it any other way. Stark swallows past the lump in
his throat, he was still angry at Bucky for leaving, angry at himself for telling him to leave, but he
wanted Bucky here, with him, and Bucky wanted to be here. Tony had no idea why, but he wouldn’t
question it, not when he felt safe in Bucky’s arms.

“Together,” he finally answers, and Barnes smiles, it’s a wobbly wet thing, but no less beautiful.

“I…I got you a birthday present,” Bucky whispers into the scant space between them, reaching into
his sweatpants’ pocket and pulls out a flat box. “It’s stupid, but…but I hope you like it anyway.”

Tony takes the small box with one hand, fearful of removing the other from Bucky lest he disappear
again, and opening the present one handed is a little difficult but Tony eventually manages and-

“You’re right, it is stupid,” Tony finally says, but he can’t keep the smile off his face or from his
voice (doesn’t want to), and feels the trickle of tears run down his flushed cheeks but doesn’t bother
to fight them because, “and it’s the best thing I’ve ever gotten, thank you, Bucky.”

Bucky smiles at Tony and helps him put the bracelet on, yes he was still mad at Bucky for leaving,
but he came back and that meant more than anything to Tony. When Bucky lays down with Tony
under the covers of his large bed, arms wrapped around the inventor and body flush against him, for
the first time, Tony lets himself be held and decides to just cherish the moment. He won’t question it,
Bucky said they’d talk and they will, but for now…Tony just cherished their moment together. It was
a strange breath of fresh air, the fact that his smile wasn’t on display to impress, not for a camera or
an audience, but for himself. This is dangerous, Stark, logic tells him, but as he meets Bucky’s gaze,
and when the man kisses him slowly but no less tenderly, he thinks maybe the heartbreak will be
worth it; for the first time, the older man feels like he can finally breathe.

Chapter End Notes
Let's just all agree, Clint is a BAMF, right? Right. Haha! I've gotten some messages saying stuff along the lines of 'Bucky is a jerk and doesn't deserve Tony', and while I can understand the feeling, I don't fully agree - and not just because I'm writing this story. Writing these characters, I want them to be as real as possible, Bucky leaving was a shit thing to do without a doubt, but not everyone reacts to situations in the best ways the first time around - we always look back in retrospect and think 'I should have done/said this/that', but in the moment when push comes to shove, we sometimes DO mess up. Bucky isn't innately a bad person, and Tony isn't a saint, they're just two human beings TRYING the best they can; Tony falls back on isolating himself, while Bucky struggles through his insecurities, but they're both trying - even if they fail, they refuse to stay down, and isn't that what being human is all about? Don't get me wrong, I'm a sucker for romantics, but a wave of my writer's wand to fix everything would just leave the potential for this story and its characters lacking - at least, that's how I feel. So yes, I totally get wanting to strangle them at times (even I do, and I'm the one writing this!) and they all have their faults, but I love them all the more for it and I hope you do too!

Anyway, sorry for that long bit, I just wanted to address the messages I was getting! I really hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and thank you SO much to everyone who commented and read the last chapter (and those before it)! Love you all, and I'll see you next chapter! xxoxoo
Trust (In Me)

Chapter Summary

A well earned conversation, and some sexy times, enjoy!

Chapter Notes

Wowwie! This 1 chapter is the equivalent to 2 whole chapters! I couldn't decide if I wanted to break it into two parts or not, but ended up deciding against it, because with everything I put y'all through, you definitely deserve it for being such awesome readers! I love y'all! xxoxoo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was strange, to be completely open and honest with another person about dying, up until now it had just been a secret between Tony and JARVIS, but - despite how Tony may have felt about the AI - JARVIS wasn’t an actual person - and sure, Steve knew to a degree, and Natasha ‘knew’ it was happening, but not…not like this. So to have Bucky staring at him from across the his kitchen island as he spilled the proverbial ‘beans’, as it were, was a jarring experience. Bucky had said nothing when they first awoke, Tony had stared up at the man who held him in both artificial and biological arms against his broad chest, and for those silent minutes Tony felt safe. Safe knowing he could have Bucky, by his side; safe in feeling he wasn’t alone any more. After everything that had happened, Tony had been exhausted and slept like the dead (yes, he sees the irony in thinking that), so if Bucky had wanted to runaway from all this he had ample time to, and yet…he didn’t. You’re still here, had been Tony’s first thoughts upon waking, and the sudden warm twinge in his chest was an addictive feeling. However, as the case always was with Tony, the silence became too much and the genius offered to make them coffee.

So here they were, standing around in his ostentatiously large kitchen, while Tony explained the palladium poisoning to Bucky. Told him about when the lines first began to appear, when he’d begun taking steps to cure himself after realizing he was being poisoned by the very thing that was supposed to keep him alive, only to learn after every failed attempt that he could only prolong the process of his death. Tony explained what the palladium cores were, how they worked, and how his body was running through them quicker and quicker as the days wore on; how eventually…they wouldn’t be enough. Finally confessing to Bucky that he was out of options, and that he was nothing more than a ticking time bomb, one that wouldn’t end in an explosion…but in cardiac arrest.

He’d stared at Bucky by the end of it all, watching the man’s face and body language for any tells; some vicious part of Tony telling himself, this is where he’ll say ‘thanks but no thanks’ and bolt for the door. Bucky’s words to him last night were ones of hope, but there was no hope with Tony, and with everything laid out bare for Bucky to see…would he still really choose to stay? Bucky said nothing for a long time, only nodding at him as Tony handed him a freshly brewed mug of his best coffee, staring down at the dark drink as though it held the answers Tony had been missing. There was a distinct line of tension across his shoulders, diamond eyes fixed on the steaming liquid in Tony’s favorite Harley Quinn mug where it sat clutched between large hands, but it gave Tony hope
that it wasn’t resignation that he saw in Bucky’s face - though for the life of him, he didn’t know why…after all, he’d resigned himself to his fate.

“Can’t you just take out the arc reactor?” Bucky asks, disused voice sounding gravelly in the quiet kitchen, but the sound was like a soothing balm to Tony’s nerves.

Stark leans forward, resting his forearms atop the kitchen island across from the man, their mugs almost touching (his was the same mug he’d used back at MIT and never let go of, and Rhodey says I’m not sentimental), “I’d considered it, after coming back from Afghanistan, but the shrapnel would kill me a lot quicker than the poisoning, and that’s if my heart can withstand the major operation that would be needed.”

Bucky’s brows furrow, and finally, he meets Tony’s eyes, “you got that in Afghanistan?”

That’s right, Tony realizes belatedly, he doesn’t know what happened there…well, to be fair no one does, not really anyway, and takes a long pull of his coffee before speaking; he recited what every news outlet worth their salt - and even those that weren’t - had published about his kidnapping; that he was kidnapped, held hostage, but returned - somehow - safely. However, this time, Tony filled in the gaps the rest of the world was still missing.

“The group that attacked us had Stark tech…during the ambush I’d had one of my own creations blow up in my face, and yes the irony isn’t lost on me,” he tries to joke, but likely misses the mark if his wavering voice and Bucky’s expression is any indicator, “and said ‘irony’ left me with a chest full of shrapnel. There was a man they’d captured, a doctor named Ho Yinsen, he was a good man…he’s honestly the reason I’m free, the reason I’m still alive.”

The phantom pain Tony felt radiating in his chest, the sick feeling welling behind his throat retelling the tale of his capture, he hated it but it was all worth it, if it meant also telling someone about Yinsen; the man deserved to be remembered.

“He did his best given the circumstances, the arc reactor you saw in the lab was something I whipped up once I was back, but Yinsen’s ingenuity and genius saved my life…even if it meant strapping a car battery into my chest - how crazy is that?” Tony chuckles wetly, clutching onto the scalding mug to ground himself, grinding his stinging palms against the ceramic. “Yinsen…he didn’t make it out, the crazy guy sacrificed himself for me, and…yeah. Yeah. I escaped, Yinsen didn’t, and I left Afghanistan knowing that my weapons were being sold to terrorists; I blew up what I could during my escape, and shut down the weapons’ program once I was State-side to make sure it couldn’t happen going forward.”

Bucky stares at Tony, his grey eyes curiously bright before shifting away, “the news said Stane had something to do with the dealings, right?”

“Yeah…” Tony clears his throat, trying to rid it of the emotion that sits thick and heavy there, and scrubs a hand down his face, it’s been a year, I should be over all of this by now, so…so why does it still hurt so much? “But what we managed to keep out of the news was that Stane had been working with the Ten Rings, and that…I wasn’t supposed to make it out of Afghanistan, but the assholes got greedy, gave me toys to play with, and it blew up in their faces, literally. That’s pretty much the long and short of i-”

The engineer barely sees him move and would have been freaked out if he wasn’t strangely impressed, but within the blink of an eye Bucky had somehow darted round the counter and was pressed flush against Tony’s back, clutching onto him as though he’d disappear if he didn’t. Tony’s mug nearly topples in his surprise but he manages to save it, and reaches a hand up to gently squeeze Bucky’s forearm where it rests across the barrel of his chest, leaning into the hold. Bucky buries his
face into Tony’s shoulder, he can’t think of anything to say, but what is there to say?

Instead of trying to speak, Tony lets Bucky hold him until the man’s trembling calms. Any other person would be running out the door by now, trying to cut out the cancer that was Tony, or selling this information to the press, but by now it was clear Barnes wasn’t just ‘any other person’. The billionaire leans back into the large man behind him, desperately soaking up the warmth that seems to radiate from Bucky’s very soul, and for those few moments doesn’t ask why or how he’d gotten so lucky finding him, and just enjoys the feeling of the man around him.

“Fuck them,” Bucky mumbles, broken, against his neck, and it shatter’s what’s left of Tony’s heart to hear, “fuck all of ‘em…Yinsen was a damn saint, I wish I could have met him…but you- you’re worth saving Tony, please believe that. You’re worth so damn much, doll…you don’t even know.”

Tony’s laugh is wobbly and scratchy in his throat, the sound almost foreign to his own ears; he wants to say you can’t really believe that, not with everything I’ve done, but with everything Bucky had said before, and the way he holds him ever so slightly tighter now, he knows the man - somehow - does. Bucky had proved himself time and again to Tony, from giving him a chance and respecting his strange boundaries, to this; ‘Barnes seems to be a genuinely good person, and I’d hate to see you miss your chance’, Carol’s words flicker to life in Tony’s mind, his hands holding Bucky just a little tighter, and feels his heart pound. He knows everything, Tony, knows it and still hasn’t runaway from you...so why are you still trying to runaway from him?

Tony knew he’d been unfair to Bucky, kicking him out after the shock of his revelation the night of his birthday, and that he was mad at him for it. To be honest, some nasty part of him wanted a reason to hate Barnes, as though hating this man would make losing him easier. It had been Tony’s go-to method for years, kick them out before they can get under your skin; even with Ty and Sunset he’d never let them in, not in any way that mattered anyway, and the thought that he wanted to let Bucky in was terrifying but…but also exciting.

Tony had been so scared of losing Bucky he never came up with a plan for what to do if the man had stayed, and he didn’t lose him, did he? Bucky was stood right behind Tony, clutching onto him for dear life and stayed with him like he’d promised. Tony had met a lot of people in his life, and very few of them ever did what they said they would, the ones that did were the ones he held on to, and Bucky...Bucky was clearly one of the precious few. Tony looks down at the thin silver chain locked around his left wrist, the little Starfleet insignia winking back at him where it rests comfortably against his skin, and feels his chest well up with something he knows the name of, but can’t bring himself to think it.

I don’t want to lose you, he doesn’t say, only holds on to Bucky tighter, thank you for staying with me, but those words feel too premature to say, so he settles on, “I wish you could have met him, too.”

Tony hears a soft sniff from the singer, but says nothing, neither moving as they hold each other, and Tony imprints the feeling of Bucky against him in his mind - wanting to remember this, for however long he’ll have it. Bucky pulls back after a while, his warmth immediately missed by Tony, who turns around to face the man - his eyes are slightly redder than they had been minutes ago. Stark reaches up, brushing strands of thick chocolate hair from Bucky’s stunning - if heartbreakingly sad - face, leaning up to press kisses to his cheeks, his forehead, his chin, and finally his mouth. Barnes kisses back just as sweetly, the hands that rest on Tony’s hips giving a light squeeze, and it almost feels like a ‘thank you’.

“You can’t give up on finding a cure, Tony,” Bucky starts, staring at the shorter man with a determination that is far more endearing than it should be (pink-nosed and red-eyed that he is). “I
“Bucky-”

“No, Tony,” Bucky cuts in, but it isn’t mean or demanding, but…pleading, “for all your genius, you said no one else knows about all this, maybe…maybe someone else could help? Don’t you geniuses have a group or something, someone you could reach out to?”

“Yeah, we all hangout in tree houses, let me just grab my tin can telephone and call up a few of my fellow nerds,” Tony snorts, but Bucky doesn’t bite, and the engineer sighs, it’s…actually not such a bad idea, “fine, just…just stop with the puppy eyes already! Geez you’re almost as bad as Rogers, I’ll reach out to some nerdy friends of mine, okay?”

And Tony wants to be annoyed, he really does, but the way Bucky’s face just lights up makes it damn near impossible, “thank you,” and the rain of peppered kisses across his face eradicates anything Bucky’s glowing face didn’t. “So until we do find a cure, what is making the poisoning worse?”

The engineer wants to argue, but how can he when Barnes looks like a determined puppy? Knowing when he’s beat, Tony relents, “stress, but short of going to yoga classes, it’s kinda impossible for a guy like me to ‘chill out’.”

“Then we’ll go to yog-”

Stark stares up at Barnes with what he knows must be an incredulous look, “Bucky I’m dying, not brain dead.”

Bucky folds large arms over his broad chest, and Tony internally congratulates himself for not actively salivating at the sight, “we’re going. Tasha teaches a yoga class every Tuesday, but I’ll speak to her about getting us a private session that’ll work with your schedule and your needs.”

“You…you’re actually serious about this, aren’t you?”

Bucky’s authoritative stance falters slightly, before crumbling altogether as his arms fall to his sides, and lets out a deep sigh, “yes Tony I am, I…because I’m a damn selfish fucker, and I want you around for as long as possible, okay? Just…just give me this, I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but please just-”

“Okay,” Tony cuts in, surprising them both, “alright fine, I’ll do the damn yoga class, now stop with the eyes!”

The smile Tony gets in reply to his agreement is more than worth it, the damn thing is so blindingly beautiful it could put the sun to shame, and Tony honestly can’t ever see himself tiring of the sight. Bucky all but throws himself at Tony, wrapping strong arms around him once again, Tony gives as good as he gets and clings to the singer. Never before had Tony thought people could care so much for something that wasn’t a sure thing, but clearly he’d never met someone like Bucky Barnes before. The duo clutch on to one another for a few moments as the silence in the room drags on, before Bucky pulls away with a new kind of determined hope in his eyes, the hand at Tony’s neck gives a gentle squeeze and the genius hums at the comforting touch.

“I’ll make us breakfast, if I’ve learned anything over this past month, it’s that you definitely don’t eat enough and that can’t be good for you,” the singer is off like a shot, humming as he moves throughout the kitchen, only pausing to ask JARVIS were certain things are.

“How is he real? Tony grins to himself, taking a sip of his coffee, he’s willingly staying with a dying
man, the brave idiot- ‘I was a coward’, Tony looks over to where Bucky stands with his head
ducked in the fridge, he can’t actually believe that, can he? Stark walks around the counter and over
to Bucky, staring sidelong at the man as he cracks eggs into a glass bowl, the brunet raising a brow at
him with a teasing smile, how can a person that looks like him, acts like him, be insecure? Think
himself a ‘coward’, no less?

“You wanna help, doll? Or just came to watch the goods?” Bucky teases, cracking another egg into
the bowl with precision ease.

Tony, you damn well know the answer to that question, you know it every time you look in a mirror,
Bucky doesn’t actually force Tony to help, throwing away the half dozen eggshells and washing his
hands before coming back over to the bowl, fork in hand to whisk. Though, Bucky does pause for a
moment, his smile under Tony’s gaze faltering slightly, brows creasing at Tony’s silence. Tony
almost doesn’t want to say anything, doesn’t was to risk losing that smile and Bucky’s easygoing
demeanor again, it had been a heavy morning but…it would eat away at him if he didn’t. You’ve
come this far and he hasn’t shut you down yet, he thinks, and just knowing that gives him a little
more courage than any bottle of whiskey ever could, talking got you this far, Tony.

“Somethin’ on my face?” Bucky asks, reaching up to wipe at his cheeks.

Insecurities are a fickle thing, be gentle and tactful when you talk-

“You’re not a coward, Bucky,” or be blunt, that works too, Tony catches the way Barnes flinches,
and reaches out a hand to rest on his jaw, “you said it last night, I…I know I can’t change what you
believe, but know that I don’t think that about you; I dropped a metaphorical bomb on you, and
blamed you for being freaked out by it, it’s not rational that I was- that I am upset that you left, and I
know that, but Bucky….that doesn’t mean I think you’re a coward-”

Barnes sighs, turning his face against Tony’s palm, “Tony I left you-”

“-but you came back,” Tony continues on, bringing up his other hand to gently nudge Bucky to meet
his eyes, to see that he means this. “You came back even though you knew I was dying, hell, you
stayed even though you know I’m dying. To me, those are not the actions of a coward, they’re the
actions of a brave man, and you are possibly the most brave and selfless, if a little idiotic, man I
know, Bucky. I can’t stop you for how you see yourself or what you think of yourself, hell, if that
worked Rhodey would have out-stubborned my insecurities years ago, but know that I do not think
of you as anything less than a damn saint, you hear me?”

Bucky rolls his eyes, his smile is strained but heartfelt, “Stark, unless you want your eggs with a side
of tears, you better stop.”

Tony smiles at the singer, the duo laugh as Bucky pulls Stark into a hug that’s almost too tight, but
Tony would never object. Stark doesn’t comment on the way his voice trembles or the wet little sniff
he hears against his neck, only hugs Bucky tighter, pulling back just enough to kiss the man and grin
up at him.

“Y’know, if you cooking for me is going to become a regular thing, I demand it be in the nude…
with a little frilly ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron,” Barnes barks a laugh and Tony grins wider, the tension in
the air finally breaking, and the billionaire giggles when the taller brunet smacks a kiss onto his lips.

“That’s so horrible, I love it, we’re doing it, it’s happening!” Bucky declares, whipping off his shirt
and tossing it to Tony who doubles over in laughter, though Tony pouts about Bucky not taking off
his sweats to see that lovely ass; he’ll excuse it, this time, anyway. Tony thinks with a goofy grin,
watching muscles ripple beneath Bucky’s skin as he works on their breakfast.
He knows it’s a long road ahead, knows it won’t be easy, but with this dork at his side, Tony believes it would be worth the uphill battle ahead of them.

*I love this dork, and I don’t think I know how not to anymore.*

Bucky’s splayed out on his side on Stark’s couch, TV show forgotten as he stares down at Tony’s sleeping face, the man looking far younger - almost heart achingly vulnerable - when he’s asleep, and Bucky feels his heart tripping over itself at the sight. Hearing Tony tell him about the arc reactor, each complex explanation in search of a cure only ending in failure had been as pleasant as being gutted, but Barnes had almost broke down when Tony confessed to him about the truth behind his disappearance. Bucky held a newfound level of respect for Tony right then, the man had been through hell but somehow made it out on the other side, and now…now he was now left alone to die in the aftermath of it all. How was that fair? It’s not, he thinks, it’s just fucking not! But…but he wasn’t alone anymore, for what it was worth, now he had Bucky - though even the singer himself wasn’t sure how much that counted for.

When he’d snapped and gave in to his need to hold Tony in the kitchen, all Bucky could think was how Tony could have died before they’d ever even met, that he could have gone his whole life thinking that Stark was nothing more than a jerk and would have never known how false that was. It terrified him to think that there could have been a chance he wouldn’t have ever been able to look into those gorgeous brown eyes, could have never heard Tony’s musical laughter, or never seen those adorable erratic hand gestures Tony made whenever he got excited about the things he talked about; that he could have lost his chance to hold this beautiful man in his arms, and not have even known it. Bucky couldn’t even imagine a life where he’d never meet Tony, never meet this brilliant and kind man who hid a gentle but battered heart behind his genius and snark; never been given the privilege to see him laugh and smile - or to be the reason behind it. However, now that he had met Tony, had bared witness to this man’s strength and vulnerabilities, he wouldn’t change a damn thing if it meant he couldn’t ever have this - have him.

Tony hadn’t explicitly said he’d given up hope on finding a cure for the poisoning, but he clearly damn well believed it with they way he spoke, though Bucky couldn’t find it within himself to give up hope - even after everything he’d heard and seen. If Tony really had given up hope in finding a cure, then Bucky would be the one to hope for him; because he did believe that if any one could solve this, it was Tony Stark. *Don’t give up, not yet, not ever…we’ll get through this, I swear to you we will-*

“Bucky?” Mumbles the man who’d taken up residence in his mind, and Bucky jolts ever so slightly at being pulled from his thoughts.

“Yes, doll?”

Tony cracks an eye open, mouth quirking up slightly as he stares up at Bucky from where his head lay rested on his chest, “y’know, I’ve never been called ‘doll’ before.”

Bucky feels himself flush slightly, chuckling nervously, “sorry, it just slipped out, if you don’t like it I-”

“-I like it,” hums the groggy man, shifting slightly to stretch out on the couch, further tangling his legs with Bucky’s. “You’re such a Brooklyn boy, it’s adorable.”

Bucky can’t help but track the sliver of skin that reveals itself at Tony’s waist where his shirt rides
up, and feels both guilt and arousal warring within him, because now didn’t seem like an appropriate
time to be pitching a tent. Tony rolls over and presses himself up against Bucky’s side, arm flung
lazily around the musician’s middle, and presses his face against the crook of his neck; his shiver is
involuntary, but fuck did he love the feeling of Tony’s mouth. Memories of their time together this
past month flashing behind his eyes, images of Tony’s face lost in pleasure, the heat of his skin
against Bucky’s; now it all felt like so much more with their defenses lowered, and God was he
aching to feel more of the man beside him. Go away, go away, GO AWAY! Bucky pleads to his
growing erection, but the damn thing doesn’t seem to have any intention of flagging any time soon,
fuckin’ traitor. Worse yet, Tony shifts his leg up, thigh moving to rest warm and heavy against his
boner; it’s right as he hears a little gasp from the genius that Bucky’s damn sure his cheeks are about
to melt right off with how hot his face gets.

“Hello there,” Tony chuckles against his neck, lips brushing against Bucky’s pulse point before they
press against it, and Barnes feels like his heart about to pound right out of his chest. “That for me?”

“Tony,” Bucky hisses when the man shifts his thigh to purposely rub against his erection, and Bucky
can’t help but buck his hips up against the pressure, but holds himself back from doing more. “Are
you su-”

“Never been more sure of anything in my life, Bucky Bear,” Tony whispers against the wet patch of
skin under his jaw, a shiver rips down Bucky’s spine, and within seconds he shifts and rearranges
them. Staring down at Tony, now splayed out beneath him and staring up at the younger man with
blown pupils, Bucky slowly lowers his hips until he’s met with a hardness that makes his mouth
water.

“Bucky, please, touch me…” Tony breathes, hands shooting up to fist his well worn shirt, that’s all
Bucky needs to topple like a damn house of cards, and silences Stark with a - less than graceful -
kiss.

Bucky almost feels like a teenager, choking back wanton moans as he and Tony grind against one
another, but God is it addicting; every moan and breathy gasp, the slightly salty tang of Tony’s skin
on his tongue as he kisses down the man’s neck, and the way Tony just reacts so beautifully - it’s
enough to drive even the most saintly wild. He couldn’t get enough. This past month had been
amazing, but now…now it almost felt electric, every touch unbidden by secrets, every moan set free
without a tinge of regret, and Bucky savored every second of it. Bucky stakes his claim on Tony at
the base of his throat like the teenager he really is, the popped blood vessels forming a beautiful oval
of purple-blue and red against Tony’s golden skin, and Bucky bites back a growl of possessiveness -
though his hands tighten around the man’s hips as he grinds against him with newfound
determination, despite his best efforts to control himself. Tony writhes against him, rocking his hips a
little more frantically - desperately - now, arms moving to wrap around Bucky’s neck and clutch at the
back of his shirt as he kisses Bucky with a fierceness that makes his head spin.

“Off,” Tony groans, and for a moment Bucky thinks he’s messed up, was too forward, but calms
seconds later when Tony starts pawing and pulling at his shirt with a petulant expression, “off!”

Bucky chuckles and shifts, sitting back on his haunches and yanks his shirt off with little care before
tossing it aside, reaching a hand out but hovers over the hem of Tony’s shirt; a silent question, a line
he didn’t dare cross before and won’t now if that’s what Tony wants, but the genius nods - slowly,
but without hesitation, and it makes the singer’s heart swell. Bucky carefully helps Tony out of his
own shirt, the slow reveal of a taut stomach and a dark happy trail leading to the waist of Tony’s
sweatpants greets Bucky, and then comes the scarring at the center of Tony’s chest - the arc reactor
and lines of poison that would haunt Bucky’s dreams. Then, almost all at once, Tony’s bare to him
an a way that’s almost breathtaking, the man won’t meet Bucky’s eyes; Bucky knows - from his own
past insecurities over his scars - that he’s embarrassed, *ashamed*, and Bucky does little to no thinking when he leans down and presses a kiss right at the center of Tony’s reactor.

Tony’s breath hitches, a clicking swallow follows, but he doesn’t push Bucky away and the brunet continues to press featherlight kisses along Tony’s scarring - accepting each and every one of them, accepting *Tony*, loving him in a way Bucky hopes is in some semblance of what the man more than deserves. Rough palms and fingertips trace over Bucky’s shoulders and neck, tentative and anticipatory against his skin as he explores the genius, grinning to himself each time the smaller man’s hands falter and gasps slip into little whimpering moans. Tony is *gorgeous*, but the way Tony holds himself tells Bucky it’s more than just the physical scares that hold him back, and Barnes wants to *scream* - wants to tear apart *anyone* who had ever made Tony feel anything less than *perfect* - but for now, he focuses on the man beneath him; focuses on *showing* Tony just how perfect he is.

“Tony…” Bucky whispers, drinking in the revenant beauty of the man splayed beneath him.

“You’re *gorgeous*, doll.”

The amalgamation of scars, of the device embedded in Tony’s chest, might scare the some away, but to Bucky they were just another reminder that Tony was here (that he was *alive*), and gave Bucky a renewed sense of determination that he wouldn’t let this man slip through his fingers so easily - no matter the trials they’d face. Silently promising against Tony’s skin that not even *death* would take him away from Bucky, not now that he *finally* has him. Bucky runs the flat of his tongue over the hardened peak of Tony’s right nipple and the moan he hears is angelic, relishing in the feeling of Tony’s talented hands tangling and gripping the locks of his hair, before gently tugging him up and reconnecting their mouths. It’s as though Tony’s at war with himself, enjoying Bucky’s explorations of him, but desperate to get off; it’s a feeling Bucky understand well with the growing painful *throb* of his cock.

“Please Bucky,” Tony begs and pointedly rolls his hips against the singer’s, making the younger man groan. “More, baby *please*.”

Bucky kisses Tony with desperate vigor, one hand steadying himself as his left yanks down Tony’s sweats and boxers to expose the man to him, taking the engineer’s length in his grip and relishes in the feeling of it in a once *unfeeling* hand - yet another thing Tony had made possible for Bucky, and a blessing he isn’t about to waste. Bucky strokes Tony for a few moments, before finally getting his own cock out of its confines, and takes them both into his grip and thrusts against Tony’s bare length. Tony spits in his hand and moves it to cup around their cocks, covering whatever flushed skin Bucky’s prosthetic cannot, and moans aloud as his head tosses back against the couch. Bucky knows the Tony must be close, because he damn well knows that *he* is, and their movements grow more frantic - less coordinated - as they chase their release. Barnes reaches a hand between them, sneaking its way past their uncoordinated hands and slick cocks, the dry fingertip ghosting over Tony’s puckered entrance, and the sound the punches out of Tony almost has Bucky losing himself right then and there.

“Tony- *holy shit*…doll you feel amazin’,” Bucky breathes against Tony’s cherry red lips, tongue darting out to steal a taste of of the man, “s’good sweetheart- *shit* you close, doll? Gonna cum for me, Tony? Bet you’d look gorgeous, you always do, like- *fuck*- like work of art….cum for me, sweet thing.”

“Bucky I’m- push, j-just a little- *ohgodyeslikethat!* *Fuck!* So…so close…*fuck!*”

Tony’s words die on his tongue as his hips stutter, Bucky’s middle finger only *just* breaching the puckered ring of muscle while his thumb messages at Tony’s perineum; the genius’ release spilling out over their fists and onto his taut stomach, Bucky follows only moments later as he topples into his
own state of ecstasy. The musician’s grip on Tony slackens before letting go entirely in favor of balancing him, lest he crush the poor (adorably tiny) man, metal and flesh hands both moving to gently squeeze at Tony’s flanks as Bucky lays slow and gentle kisses against the man’s neck, the expanse of skin vulnerable to Bucky with Tony’s head tipped back against the cushions. Bucky wants to stay in this moment forever, in the after glow of their shared orgasms, the air hot and heavy between them as they try to catch some purchase to pull themselves back into reality; wants to forever relish in the warmth of Tony’s body against his own. However, as their spunk begins to cool and their tacky skin catches against each other, Bucky decides to clean up before things become too uncomfortable, but just as he pulls away to reach for his shirt, he stops.

Holy fiuckin’ shit…

Tony stares up at Bucky with a blissed out expression, his hands subconsciously flex on Tony’s tapering waist, drinking in the sight of the man beneath him with an admiration that overwhelms Bucky; has to keep himself grounds with the contact, lest he get knocked on his ass by it all. Kiss-bitten red lips parted in a way that has his spent cock twitching, Bucky’s moment of hoodlum possessiveness stamped on Tony’s neck for the world to see; the way Tony’s chest is flushed, his thighs trembling ever so slightly. It’s a symphony of carnal sin and something so, so much deeper and vulnerable that it has Bucky’s heart and stomach switching places; the brunet doesn’t think his actions through, but can’t bring himself to stop as he reaches out to smear their shared release against Tony’s skin - an almost animalistic instinct to remind others that this man was his and his alone.

Tony slowly grins and hums, taking Bucky’s soiled hand into his own and bringing it to his lips, and- oh good Christ on a crutch- licks Bucky’s hand clean with slow, lazy wipes of his tongue. Bucky feels his cock give another valiant twitch, but knows he’ll need a few more minutes at the very least before even contemplating another around with Tony, though he wants to - God does he want to.

“You’re unbelievable,” Bucky groans, biting at his lower lip with hooded eyes trained on Tony’s mouth, watching as the pink muscle dart out in between his prosthetic fingers.

“And you’re kinky,” Tony snarks back, grinning wide and brilliant, “in a way that’s way more sexy than it has any right to be.”

“You did it to me before, fair’s fair,” Bucky chuckles, hand - now licked clean, good fucking hell, Tony - moving to cup Tony’s jaw as his thumb stokes over the man’s swollen lower lip, “and you may have definitely just ruined all other people for me.”

“Good,” there’s a finality to his tone that has Bucky grinning, with everything going on, he never got the chance to talk about making their arrangement more exclusive, but that tone gives him hope - the primal hindbrain in him chanting a litany of minegorgeousmineperfectmine, and wonders if Tony feels the same way.

Taking Bucky’s thumb into his mouth, Tony sucks on it for a moment, only to let go seconds later with an obscene pop, and surges up to kiss Bucky - their shared tastes making the musician’s head spin in the best of ways. Their frantic kiss slows to a gentle jog, lazy explorations of each other’s mouths in search of nothing more than comfort with one another; it’s gentle, intimate, and Bucky knows he must look like a cat that got the canary when he breaks it to rest his forehead against Tony’s - though, right then, he can’t really bring himself to care. They’d had sex before, several time, but this…this was just somehow more, and Bucky feels his heart swell and twist with it.

“I’m not letting you go without a fight, Tony,” he presses a kiss to the man’s forehead, smile tugging wider his lips at the adorable way Tony hums, the way his hands hold on to him just a little tighter, “we’ll get through this, together, ya hear me?”
If Tony’s eyes seem a little brighter to Bucky when he pulls back to meet the man’s gaze, he says nothing about it. After they clean up, redress, and lay in each other’s arms Tony wraps himself around Bucky and clings - which is perfectly okay, because Bucky holds on just as tight.

_I’ll never let you give up because I’ll never give up on you_, Bucky kisses Tony’s hair, smiling down at the man when he cranes his neck to look up at him, and presses a soft kiss to those tempting lips, _we’ll get through this…I promise you we will._

“Together,” the word is faint, barely above a sighed breath as Tony drifts off, but Bucky catches it all the same.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

Heyo everyone! I really hope you liked this chapter! As always, I wanna thank all you wonderful people for your reads, kudos and comments! I'll see you all next chapter!!

xxoxoo
Monaco: Pre-Flight Entertainment

Chapter Summary

Tony comes up with an insane idea, and knows just who might be able to help, while the rest enjoy their little in-flight show during their flight to Monaco...

Chapter Notes

Heyo everyone! Man oh man my sleep has been MESSED UP lately! Finishing up this chapter I was going on 44hrs of literally no sleep straight! UGH! I'm worried about crashing, but made sure to finish this chapter up before I - very likely - go comatose once my sleep finally catches up to me. (>_<) Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Okay lady, I may be bendy, but that’s like Cirque Du Soleil level bendy,” Tony huffs, falling back on his ass onto his yoga mat in the empty studio, trying to catch his breath - who knew yoga could really build up a sweat? - and a flick at his ear has Tony correcting himself, “sorry Nat, I meant Ms. Romanoff.”

“One, ‘Nat’ is fine,” Natasha rolls her eyes at Tony’s correction, but glares at him for her second point, “and two, you’re not even trying, Tony.”

“‘Not trying’? I was totally there and in it for the arms and legs thingy!” The thirty-nine year old genius, billionaire, inventor, and philanthropist…whines, like a two year old.

“Virkshasana is a warm up pose, Stark, and you know that,” the redhead moves to plops down - how is her ‘plopping’ even graceful? Tony silently wonders - beside the billionaire, and sets a slender hand on his upper back. “Now why don’t you tell me what’s really going on? You were doing pretty well the last few sessions, what? Is it because Bucky’s not here? Tony I swear-”

“Nothing’s working, Nat,” Tony sighs, shifting to sit up on his haunches beside the woman, hands turning into pale fists at his knees, “the poisoning is getting worse, and I don’t know how to tell Bucky.”

Since he and Bucky’s little heart-to-heart two weeks ago, Tony began telling those closest to him about the palladium poisoning, not the nitty gritty details he entrusted to Barnes, but enough that they understood his situation. So far he’s told Rhodey and Carol, who had taken it pretty well - well…Carol did scream at him for the better part of an hour, while Rhody burned holes into Tony’s face with his I’m Disappointed in You, Tony stare right there beside her, but overall it went better than expected. He’d told Bucky’s friends - ‘your friends too’ Bucky would always correct - to ensure they knew what to expect if things…didn’t go well, so they’d understand why Bucky suddenly lost his new boyfriend, and that he’d be taken care of if it it came to that. Happy finding out had been a total accident (obviously he was going to tell the man, but the way it happened wasn’t how Tony had planned), it happened after a meeting when a core gave out on him before he could switch it in time, and - while Tony knew it was a shitty thing to ask of him - Happy promised not to tell Pepper; Tony
wanted it to come from him and he’d planned to tell her in Monaco, Happy made him swear on it, and Tony never broke a promise to someone he loved - plus, Happy swore he’d take a crowbar to Tony’s car collection if he didn’t, so…more incentive?

He’d opened up to Natasha to the same level he’s opened up to the rest, if going into a little more detail about the technical aspects of his arc reactor, but only enough to ensure the sessions she created for Tony would properly push him but not harm him - she’d done an amazing job, even Tony was willing to admit to that. The redhead had grown to be one of Tony’s favorites amongst Bucky’s friends, she cut through the bullshit while somehow still being kind about everything, quickly proving herself smart and capable with everything she did - she was almost as terrifying as Pepper, almost. However, even with all of her and Bucky’s effort, it wasn’t slowing the slow rise in his blood’s poisoning enough and-

“Have you actually been looking for a cure?” The words aren’t unkind or accusatory, but still rub Tony the wrong way, making the man bristle.

“Of course I’ve been-”

“But Tony,” she silences him with the single word, and paired it with a look that would probably have most wondering if she was about to either up and leave, or smack them - if not both. “I can’t lie and say I know shit about the science you’re dealing with, especially at your level, but Antoshka when you first told me about all of this, you’d already given up- no, I saw it - you had agreed to this for Bucky, so my question is, are you looking for his benefit, or yours?”

Tony stares at Natasha for a moment, her words sinking in, and Tony wanted to bite back that of course he was fucking trying it was his mortality on the line, but was he? Before Bucky came along, Tony had resigned himself to his fate and just tried to do the best he could with the time he had left, but Barnes had up-ended all that by all but begging Tony to keep trying - so he did. He’d called in Reed and Helen, being the only two others he trusted with his secret, but even with their help…they were hitting dead ends. So yes, he’d been trying, but…he’d been trying for Bucky, not for himself.

It should seem like more, with how much Bucky meant to Tony, and Tony knew that explanation should be good enough but…it just wasn’t because what was the point of ‘trying’ if it was in someone else’s name? Bucky gave Tony hope, but probably not in the way the musician intended; the ‘hope’ Bucky gave Tony was hope that his final days wouldn’t be miserable and lonely, but that right there was the issue, wasn’t it? ‘His final days’…wasn’t he supposed to find a way to fix this? Sure, Tony could die in a freak accident tomorrow, but right now? He’s still resigned himself to death via the damn palladium poisoning. Nat’s right, he thinks, eyes finally meeting her forest greens once again, I can’t give up on myself…just like that gorgeous moron refuses to give up on me.

Natasha must see his new resolve solidify because she grins, “good. Now, are you packed for Monaco?”

Tony chuckles at the change of topic, but is grateful for it, “always ready for a sunny getaway, are you kidding? Also, Bucky is such an over-packer, Christ.”

“He gets it from Steve,” she says while helping Tony up, the two beginning to pack away the few yoga instruments strewn about, “Steve’s mother was always a nervous flyer, but in the ‘did we pack that?’ sense, so they kinda just pack, well, everything.”

Tony laughs, a bark of elation at the small bit of history about Bucky and Steve, but winces when his chest protests the action and gently rubs his palm against the reactor; Natasha’s right eyebrow twitches in question and Tony shrugs, it’s enough of an explanation, but it brings their conversation back to the forefront of his mind. Natasha was right, if he was going to do this he had to do it for
himself, but even then you’ve tried everything humanly possible, his mind reminds. Anthony Edward Stark, you made a arc reactor in a cave, if anyone can figure this out, it’s you and your ego refusing to fail, a voice - that sounds almost too much like Jarvis from his childhood - reprimands, and right then Tony stops mid-step in his journey towards his car.

“We’ve literally tested the entire fucking periodic table and- wait, that’s it!” Tony quickly digs into his gym bag, all but yanking out his StarkPhone and dials a number of a man he never thought he’d see again, and grins manically when the call actually goes through.

“Tony?”

“Hey there,” Stark smiles at the familiar voice from his college days, don’t give up just yet, “I think I finally owe you that lab tour, don’t you think, Brucie?”

“Can he seriously help?” Bucky asks, trying to keep the elation at bay (probably trying to not jump the gun with his excitement), but the expression mirrored tenfold in his bright eyes while hands hold Tony’s a little tighter as they stand in the empty jet.

“Hopefully, he’s flying out from some village tomorrow to my workshop in the tower to look over what we have so far, but if anyone’s crazy enough to try to make a new element it’s Banner, and-” that’s about as much as Tony manages out before his face is smushed against a - inhumanly - sculpted chest, but laughs into said chest as he returns the hug.

“Oh God,” Bucky breathes into his hair, voice trembling as his arms tighten around Tony, “I know this doesn’t mean your aren’t…y’know, but it’s something, holy fuck, doll!”

“I know if anyone can help me with this, it’s Bruce. We’d somehow have to manage to defy all the existing laws of the universe, but if it works then that means…no more dying. It’s…it’s kinda crazy, I mean it’s all crazy and pretty much hypothetical at this point, but…yeah…there’s still hope, Buck,” Tony knows his voice doesn’t sound as steady as he’d like for it to be, and maybe he holds onto Bucky a little tighter right then, but for the first time in months this is actually progress in finding a way out of the damn woods - Tony had been thinking within the confines of all that currently existed, but he was an inventor, and who better suited than a futurist to start reaching out for what could be?

“Tony?” Bucky and Tony yank apart to see- oh shit. SHIT!

“Pep-”

“What do you mean ‘no more dying’?” The redhead interrupts, eyes jumping from Tony to Bucky, then to Bucky’s tear-streaked face, and settling on Tony’s watery expression - probably mixed in with a little fear now. “What did you mean ‘no more dying’, Anthony?”

He knows that tone, it is not a good tone.

Tony wants nothing more than for the ground to swallow him up, or at the very least have Bucky at his side during this moment, but knows he owes Pepper a proper explanation - after so long of hiding and lying about his dying to her, she deserves his honesty - finally.

“Bucky could you-”

“I’ll go help out the others with…stuff, yeah, with stuff,” Bucky makes a hasty retreat, saying a
quick hello to Pepper as he passes her, but the woman has her sights locked on her former boss.

“I think maybe you should take a seat-“

“Don’t patronize me, Tony,” Pepper bites out, openly glaring at the inventor now, “what the hell did you mean-”

“I’m dying, Pep.” Tony says it like the fact it is, and feels his chest tighten as he watches the way Pepper’s expression morphs and changes with every thought that passes her mind, even a brief flicker of a pissed off smile passes over her face when she must come to the thought that Tony was messing with her, but the expression was gone just as soon as it appeared. “Pepper-”

“How?”

Tony swallows thickly but still reaches for the collar of his shirt, pulling the fabric down enough to reveal the Tetris lines of his demise, and sighs when he feels the soft tips of Pepper’s manicured fingers brush over them with a reverent melancholy in her usually bright and intelligent eyes.

“The prosthetics line-”

“-something I should have done sooner-”

“-the promotion-”

“-Virginia, no, I made that decision before Afghanistan ever even happened-” Tony’s defense of giving Pepper the deserved position as CEO is cut off by the cracking of skin-on-skin, but before Tony can even process being slapped Pepper all but throws herself at him.

“You ass!” Her cries are muffled against his rapidly dampening shirt, but all Tony could do was hold on to the wonderful woman in his arms, “why didn’t you tell me?!”

“You had enough going on Pep, with the Expo and now being CEO-”

“One of the most important people in my life is dying and you think I didn’t want to be there for them?” Pepper pulls back enough to look up at Tony, anger and anguish fighting for prominence on her delicate features, “you were alone in all this, Tony, and that’s not okay! I know I’m not a genius, but… but you could have at least let me be there for you, you…you selfish prick!”

Tony can’t help it, the laughter bubbles out of him before he has a chance to stop it, doubling over with what must be one of the most ill-timed giggling fits of his life - one of them, since he is Tony Stark asshole-extraordinaire, after all, and he had a reputation to maintain. Pepper’s lips even curl up in a watery smile, chuckling hoarsely as she wipes the tears from her pale face, and places a kiss on Tony’s forehead. The woman clings to him but says nothing, and Tony doesn’t try to fill the silence, allowing her to process the information in her own time. Tony’s arms tighten around the slim waist of the woman that clings to him, and sighs, she deserves so much better than the shit I put her through, but Tony knows he’d never let Pepper go without a fight.

Pepper had been Tony’s rock for years, meeting the wonderfully intelligent woman right out of MIT and hiring her on the spot for nothing more than her sheer talent and determination, but Pepper was a fixer and this was one problem she wouldn’t have been able to work her magic on. Tony knew it had been cruel to keep her - and the other few people Tony genuinely loved and cared for in his life - in the dark about it all, but he couldn’t think of anything more cruel than giving Pepper a problem she couldn’t solve, one that would have forced her into a helpless position - he couldn’t do that, not to her. However, now it seemed to be all coming to a turning point; he’d either explore the unexplored and find a cure, or…the other thing, either way Tony believed they all had a right to know, and now
that they finally did it… it felt better, selfishly, but it did.

“You were happy,” Pepper says as she takes a step back, patting at the slightly smeared make up beneath her eyes as she composed herself, ever the mature professional, “before Bucky left, you both seemed happy.”

Tony nods, scrubbing his face clean, “yeah, there’s a guy I went to university with, Bruce Banner, I called him on to help, fresh eyes of a crazy scientist and all that, y’know?”

“I do,” the redhead nods, breathing deep, “Rhodey told me about the time you two set him on fire at MIT.”

“Hey to be fair, Brucie won that bet fair and square, and Rhodey was being a baby, Bruce and I let him wear flame retardant clothing,” Tony grins down at the younger woman, the literal embodiment of everything perfect in the world, and doesn't bother fighting back the urge to pull Pepper in for another hug. “We’re not out of the woods yet, but it’s something.”

“I’ll take it,” her hands fist into Tony’s shirt, the top of her head just low enough for Tony to kiss her hair, “I’ll take it, but no more secrets, you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Ms. Potts.”

“Oh shut it,” the fondness in her voice is enough to warm Tony’s chest twice over, and the older man relishes in the feeling.

“Well, so far, Tony hasn’t been thrown out of the jet,” Steve starts, glancing over at Bucky from the bottom of the jet’s boarding staircase, “so maybe that’s a good sign?”

Bucky runs a hand through his hair, “honestly, from what I’ve seen and heard, Pepper’s a lot like Nat-”

“-oh he’s totally dead then,” Sam cuts in, deadpan, Barnes smacks his bicep with the back of his hand and the three giggle like children.

“Are we doing this or what?” Clint asks from behind his bandmates, their instruments being loaded onto the jet along with their belongings - Tony had asked them to perform during the trip, and none of them would turn down the chance at a paid gig, broke artists and all that. “I got a pair of board shorts and coconuts filled with rum waiting with my name on it!”

“Just give it a few-”

“Who’s ready to party?!” A voice bellows from behind the group, Bucky only just manages not to laugh when Clint jumps about five feet into the air, and turns to see Carol and a few other men and women in tow. “Good to see you guys again!”

Clint grins, slinging an arm around Natasha and Danvers’ shoulders, pulling both women closer with a grin resembling that of a toddler on Christmas rather than a full grown ex-military man, but neither woman seemed put off by the overgrown child; Carol even seems - almost - as excited. The groups come together and get on like a house on fire, all boisterous chatting and playful shoves as the rest of the volunteers arrive, each greeting each other warmly after the months they’d all gotten to know each other - it almost feels like a summer camp to Bucky. The large group was just starting to get restless when a spiky brunet head pops out of the door of the aircraft, Tony grinning like a loon
behind lilac tinted glasses at the expectant people, tumbler of whiskey already in the air when he
speaks.

“Let’s get this thing started!”

The group all cheer before boarding the two private jets waiting for them, giving each volunteer
enough room on the ride to Monaco without crowding each other. Bucky heads back into the Tony’s
jet, his group following behind, and plops down beside Tony at the front of the jet.

“Swanky.”

“You love it.” Tony chuckles, plush lips pressed against the rim of the glass, head tilting back to take
a pull while keeping an eye on the musician.

“Not the only thing I love, but defiantly a close second,” the words leave Bucky before he can
properly think them through, hoping his lighter and more jovial tone from seconds ago masks what the fuck he’d just said.

Bucky feels his throat collapsing in on itself as he waits for Tony to respond, the smaller brunet
staring at him for a moment before taking a another sip of the amber liquor, throat working a moment
longer than it takes to swallow and opens his mouth to speak. Both hope and dread fill Bucky; they’d just started properly seeing each other two weeks ago, and his veiled confession wasn’t about
to help matters if Tony didn’t feel the same. They were in the infancy of dating, Bucky hadn’t even
had time to take Tony out on a proper date yet, let alone be throwing around the fucking L-word!
However, before Tony can answer, a new voice - mercifully - cuts into their halted conversation.

“We have shrimp on this plane?!” Clint exclaims snatching up a small bowl of cold shrimp, the tail
of one stuck out the corner of his mouth, and Steve cuffs the back of Barton’s head mumbling
something about manners before sitting on his other side. “Stark I’m never moving outta this thing,
deal with it!”

“Pep’s the one who made me take out the stripper poles add a mini kitchen instead,” throwing back
the rest of his drink, Tony straightens up, flashing a grin at Clint as he adds, “thank her for the
shrimp, shrimp. Anyone want anything to drink?”

The offer is waved off by the rest of the group and Tony leaves to refill his own tumbler, leaving
Bucky alone with his friends, and suddenly the brunet wished he’d sat somewhere else.

“How’s it going with…you know who, Buck?” Sam asks as he leans conspiratorially closer, grinning
at his best friend, but Bucky scrubs a hand down his face.

“I fucked up.”

“How?” Clint asks, mouth full of shrimp, only to stuff another in - Bucky wondered idly if there
were any eating competitions in Monaco. “We literally just took off.”

“I think…I think I just told Tony I love him.”

“What?!”

“What’d he say?” Both Clint and Natasha, respectively, hiss in unison - though Natasha does so
without shrimp flecks flying everywhere, thanks for that Clint, Bucky thinks as he cringes and wipes
off the little bits from his jeans.

“Well he isn’t here mackin’ on me, is he?” Bucky doesn’t mean to snap at his friends as he answers,
but when his eyes roam over to Tony by the mini bar, chatting away with one of the other volunteers, and can’t help but feel curls of anger and jealousy threatening to choke him. “We just started seein’ each other, so I can’t just expect more and…I mean, even with everything, I don’t know where I stand with him.”

“You gotta talk to Tony, Buck, that’s the only way it’ll work.” Sam, ever the rational assat that he is, says reasonably.

“Yeah,” Barton agrees, snatching up another shrimp from his bowl, “I mean the last time y’all kept shit to yourselves Tony didn’t tell you he was dying, you’re basically the poster children for every ‘no communication leads to shit’ analogy, like, ever.”

Natasha swats Clint’s shoulder, but doesn’t miss a beat in her response, “despite his idiocy, Clint’s right, Bucky- yes, yes I just said that now shut it. Bucky, if Tony really isn’t going to be able to find a cure for his poisoning…do you really want to be living with a ‘what if’? Tell him; worst case scenario, he doesn’t feel the same, but at least you know where you stand with each other, and if he does feel the same? Well, you either get to make the most of the time you have together, and the hotel rooms during this trip, or he makes it out of this safely and you can go on living together.”

“I can’t tell you what to do Bucky, but Nat’s right-”

“I’m always right-”

“-but,” Steve emphasizes, casting a quick - if slightly fond - glare at the redhead, reaching out he takes Bucky’s trembling hand in his own and gives it a gentle squeeze, “we’ll have your back, whatever you choose, okay?

“Mother is right, Bucky, we will have your back…though I may smack you if you don’t speak to him,” Natasha adds casually, grinning at the glare second Steve sends her way, but Sam seems to be on her side, so there’s that.

Barnes tries to cobble together a convincing enough smile so that Steve ‘mom at the ready’ Rogers wouldn’t play helicopter parent, and it must work because the blond smiles and lets go of his hand. However, the serene moment ends abruptly when someone literally squawks, the trio whip around to see everyone doubled over in laughter and join in a split second behind; Wade was twisted up into something resembling a human pretzel in between Danvers is legs, strong thighs clamped around the man’s middle while her vice-like grip pins down his limbs, laughing when Wilson tries wriggling free to no avail.

“You tried me, Wade!” The blonde cackles, and despite the uncomfortable position, Wade seems to be fighting off his own laughter.

“Petey, help me!” Wade cries out for help, but Bucky’s gotta admit, the man’s bendy.

“I am not getting involved in this, Wade,” the smaller brunet says from beside Tony, giggling like a goon right along with the genius who- christ that’s just not fair.

Tony glances over at Bucky, eyes dancing with mirth as the corners of them wrinkle in a way that has Barnes is heart doing a little dance, and can’t help the way his chest twists as he smiles back.

*I love you, Tony Stark. God help me, I love you so damn much.*
Thank y'all SO MUCH for supporting, reading, leaving kudos, and commenting on this story! It means so much to me!! I'll see you lovely humans next chapter! xxoxoo
Monaco: Expect the Unexpected

Chapter Summary

Finally reaching Monaco, Bucky isn't out of ways to surprise Tony, but it seems life has some surprises of its own...

Chapter Notes

Golly! This chapter is another long one, it's honestly the length of 2 but I just couldn't bring myself to spilt it, so I'm sorry about the length but I hope you enjoy! xxoxoo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony’s schedule…well, actually Pepper’s schedule - Tony could hardly keep track of what month it was, let alone make a detailed syllabus for the volunteers, medical teams, and himself - for the models/volunteers had scattered out the photoshoots and rehabilitation sessions throughout the week, so that they could enjoy their little vacation in between what needed to be done, but the first day was a day off for everyone. Tony had fully intended on enjoying the off day with his new boyfriend, it’s still strange for Tony to think he had a boyfriend, having given up on the whole concept after Stone. Tony hadn’t dated since Ty, and before that there was Sunset, which wasn’t much better, either - there was a stint with socialite Whitney Frost in between Sunset and Ty that lasted about a month, but Tony didn’t dare utter the woman’s name, lest she somehow hear it and think he revoked the restraining order; it was an interesting lesson for Tony, learning the difference between ‘love’ and ‘stalking’, terrifying, but a lesson learned nonetheless. However, Bucky was different than those two monsters - Tony was comfortable enough now calling them as much, finally admitting to himself how horrible they’d been to him - that much was undoubtable, just being who he was enough reason for Tony to give this whole thing a chance, and damn did Bucky make it easy.

*He makes it so easy to love him,* Tony thinks with a wistful smile, climbing off the bus to stand in front of the hotel while the others unloaded behind him. Though on the jet Bucky had been…a little odd; for a second Tony had thought he was hinting at being in love with the genius, before not so subtly scrambling to correct his error, and it…hurt, sure, it really fucking hurt but it’s for the best that he doesn’t feel that way. Tony tells himself as he takes in a lung full of fresh salty air, saying those three little words while everything is still so unsure would just complicate things, and we’re finally at a good place…why risk ruining that? Tony whips around and looks towards the volunteers, clapping his hands together to get everyone’s attention, and for a moment feels like the teacher assigned to a school trip - alrighty everyone, grab a buddy! He’s almost tempted to call out, knowing exactly who he’d snatch up for a partner, stop being so damn cheesy and get this shindig started!

“Allright everyone, so Ms. Potts likely explained everything to you, but I’ll just go over a few things; everything on this trip is covered by Stark Industries,” there’s a smattering of claps and Tony chuckles, “anything you buy in town out of your own pockets, just keep hold of the receipts and we’ll reimburse you, whatever you can charge to your rooms, do so, and we’ll take care of that too; all this applies to both volunteers and hired teams,” this time Tony has to work to calm down the cheers, but feels himself getting giddy off of everyone else is excitement.
“Lastly, you’ve be emailed your schedules, they’re your guides to knowing where you need to be and when; from when you’re needed pout for the cameras, to your sessions with our lovely medical teams, and leisure time,” everyone nods along, but Tony knows what they’re all waiting to hear, likely because it’s something he’s excited for, too. “Make sure you guys have the StarkPhones provided to you, and for the rest of the day, go have fun! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t!” The last bit has everyone - Tony included, because he knows himself, after all - cackling, the groups scattering off into the hotel, likely to set their things down before going to explore, and Tony turns his attention to the only man that’s on his mind.

“Hey there, soldier,” Tony purrs, leaning against a nearby tree, “you come here often?”

“Depends,” Bucky struts over and crowds Tony against the tree, Tony raises a brow and smirks, back pressing flush against the ragged trunk as powerful arms box him in, “how are often are you here?”

Tony keeps his composure for all of two seconds before giving in to his giggles, “that was probably the cheesiest thing I ever heard-”

“-oh c’mon, your line was way more chees-”

“-and I love it,” Tony goes on to say, grabbing Bucky by the shirt collars and planting a kiss against those sinful lips, the man straightening his slouched stance enough to ghost his chest over Stark’s.

“Good, because I’m as romantically cheesy as they come, Hugh Grant ain’t got nothin’ on me,” Barnes chuckles, voice gravelly and just breathy enough to send shivers down Tony’s spine, I’ll never tire of that damn voice, Star Command help me. “Can I get a little more of those kisses your offerin’?”

“You bet your perky ass you ca-”

“MOM! DAD AND HIS BOYFRIEND ARE KISSING!” A voice bellows out, and while Tony nearly brains himself on the tree, Bucky trips over his own feet and lands on his ass hard enough to make Tony wince in sympathy. The two look over and see-

“Clint, you piece of shit!” Bucky roars glaring daggers at his friend and bandmate, rolling onto his side to rub at his rump, at the same time Tony asks-

“Wait, does that make me the dad or the boyfriend?” Because, y’know, priorities, but Tony bites back a laugh as he helps Bucky up.

“You’re the hot new boyfriend, duh,” Clint answers easily, keeping his eyes trained on Barnes, likely readying himself to run off the second Bucky decides to retaliate, “Steve’s the mom.”

“I resent that.” It’s only then that Tony notices the blond coming up behind Clint, their other friends and a few new faces (well somewhat new, I know their files, Tony notes) walking in tow behind him, and cuffs Barton up side the back of the head once he comes to a stop beside the drummer, “if I was your mother, I’d make you sheer off that rat’s nest you call a ‘hairstyle’.”

Barton scoffs, clearly affronted and turns his back to Bucky who- oh I see what you did there, Rogers, sneaky, Tony thinks with a grin right before his boyfriend bum-rushes Barton, the duo flying off about a foot to the side before land on the floor, hard; everyone - including Tony - in the group ooooo’s as one. It’s a little surprising that the hotel security doesn’t kicked up a fuss about the morons’ tussling, but Stark knew it was likely because those morons were his guests, and instead turns his attention to Rogers while Bucky and Clint duke it out like the mature intellectuals they are -
Tony swears he hears Plato quoted somewhere in between all the cussing.

“You signed up for this the second you agreed to date him,” Rogers huffs fondly, shakings head before looking over at Tony, “thanks for letting us come on this trip, Tony, it was really kind of you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Tony hums, glancing over to the two for a moment, before looking back to Rogers and waves a hand, “don’t mention it, besides, you guys are performing at the pool party tonight, so we’ll call it even.”

“We were thinkin’ of lookin’ around, never been to Monaco before, Darcy has a whole list of stuff she and ‘Tasha wanna see, so we’re gonna tag along,” Rogers answers, and looking over his shoulder Tony sees the two women with their heads ducked looking over a map, “but I don’t think it should take too long, Buck said he was spending the day with you?”

“Yeah,” Tony grins, that was news to him, but not something he was about to object to, “I thought maybe lazying around the beach would be fun, it’s been a while since I last went…plus, I could use the sun, my ass is as pale as Nosferatu’s face.”

Tony only adds that last part to make Rogers laugh, and the man does, it’s loud and barking but altogether endearing; it was obvious why Peggy liked him, he was a hard man not to like. Tony was actually glad he and Steve got along, he knew how much the man - how much all his friends - meant to Bucky, the blond was a good man and one Tony was happy to call a friend. They all were, Tony still didn’t understand why Natasha would text him to go shopping with her and Darcy (sometimes, the tiny brunette would even wrangle Loki and Thor into coming too, Darcy was tiny, but her spirit was as big as Mt. Everest, if not grander); why Sam and Clint would insist he joined them on their weekly jaunts around the city in search for the best buffalo wings; why Phil and Steve invited him to every Dodgers baseball game that came up. Tony didn’t know why they did it, even if it was for Bucky’s sake, it still seemed like too much, but he liked it - loved it when the girls would happily have Pepper along, when Happy and Carol were there to crack jokes at Tony’s expense for going red-faced at particularly spicy wings, or when Rhodey and Steve would scream at the top of their lungs from the bleachers at a bad play.

He didn’t understand why they invited him along, but Tony always showed up when they did, without fail.

“We’ll leave you guys to it then, Clint! Get your ass over here before I come over there and get you!” He calls out, the two of them looking over to still see the duo wrestling, Bucky had the drummer in a headlock, Steve sighs and adds, “don’t make me count to three!”

Tony barks a laugh, only guffawing louder when the duo not only break apart but scramble over to them, “man, Steve has you two whipped.”

“Oh no, Stevie is totally a little shit,” Bucky starts, sightly breathless and flushed, man that’s a good look on him, “last time this troll got up to three Sam and Clint ended up hosed down-”

“-oh you’re being dramatic-”

“-Steve we were in the middle of the mall, how you found the hose is still beyond me!”

“Steve counting to three is no joke,” Clint nods solemnly in agreement, before darting over to Sam and Will- no, it’s Wade, Wade Wilson, he’s the one that sticks to Parker like a limpet.

Tony giggles and smiles, leaning against Bucky’s side when the man wraps an arm around his
middle and gently tugs him into his side, and it warms some long forgotten juvenile part of Tony that Bucky is so comfortable being seen openly affectionate with him. The duo bid their farewells to the groups before heading into the hotel, Bucky apologizing to the security guards outside the doors as they pass, heading up to the penthouse where their stuff awaits them - yes, they’re sharing a room and everything, Tony can’t even bring himself to be sorry for it. Him and Bucky had a reason to be in close quarters, and Tony was taking advantage of every second of it - he’d offered to get them twin beds, or separate rooms, but when Barnes laughed in his face over the offer Tony had gleefully reserved a the penthouse with a single four-poster bed.

“You okay with us spending time at the beach?” Tony asks while they sift through their things, digging out his trunks and looking for his tablet, deciding he can probably get some work done while they’re out there.

“Oh man I haven’t been to the beach in ages!” Bucky groans in excitement, punching the air before snatching up his own change of clothes, already stripping while Tony watches - he’s complete obvious and unapologetic about it, but if you were in the presence of a specimen like Bucky, you’d be helpless but to stare too. Maybe even drool a little.

Tony pauses while digging through his suitcase, worrying at his lower lip for a moment before deciding maybe some shirtless fun with Bucky would be worth the trouble, and snatches up the little case Loki had packed in like he’d asked - the man had no idea what it was for, but thankfully he’d been going on excitedly about his upcoming date with Thor that he didn’t really question anything but Tony’s style pairing choices, though that wasn’t anything new. Though, unbeknownst to Loki (or Pepper), Tony managed to sneak his robot tie past the fashionista’s censorship. Bucky turns around to grin at Tony once the man’s arms are full of his own clothes and equipment, crossing the threshold to plant a kiss on Tony’s lips, all the while distractingly shirtless.

“Need a hand with anythin’, doll?” Tony rolls his eyes and huffs, for as much as he very much would like that, he doesn’t have the time - not if he wants to get the prosthetic on.

“Actually yes I-”

“-c’mere-” Bucky growls reaching for Stark, who steps out of his reach with a smirk, continuing over his boyfriend’s words.

“-need you to find my tablet, can you do that for me, Bucky Bear?” The singer faux glares at the genius with with an exaggerated pout before relenting.

“Fine,” he huffs, dragging out each letter before rummaging through Tony’s carry-on while Stark heads into the lavatory, switching out his clothes his beach ones before setting everything down and getting to work.

The prosthetic skin isn’t really all that comfortable, and if someone where to pay proper attention the skin would look a little...off with it’s overt smoothness and slight unevenness where the reactor’s edges press against it, but for all it’s little faults it does a phenomenal job of hiding the machinery in his sternum; a little heavy-duty concealer and color-corrector hide whatever bits of the palladium poisoning the prosthetic doesn’t. Holy...holy shit, Tony thinks to himself, staring at his bare and clear chest for the first time in over a year, and Stark stares until a knock on the door jolts him out of his reverie.

“You good in there, sweetheart?” Tony doesn’t think he’ll ever tire of those nicknames, he never had nicknames - at least, not sweet ones like these.

“Yeah, yeah I-” Tony pauses, casting his reflection one last glance before reaching for the
bathroom’s door handle, “Buck I have something to show you, it’ll be a bit weird, but…I think you’ll like it.”

“Okay, what is it- what the hell?” Bucky’s tone switches from tentative to utterly confused the second his eyes land on Tony, pale eyes pausing at his chest, and while questions seem to be bubbling up behind Bucky’s eyes the man remains silent - all at once, Tony feels himself shriving back, this was a stupid idea- “No, no, doll, don’t do that, where’s your arc reactor? And the lines?”

He’s confused, okay, that’s fair, that’s good actually because it mean that Tony did a good job, “I put on a prosthetic skin and a bit of waterproof makeup, since we’re going to the beach I thought it would be best, just…just be normal for a minute, y’know?” It’s because Bucky stays silent, staring at his clear chest, that Tony’s need to fill in the quiet has him rambling, “I know, you’re probably wondering why I don’t use it more often? It’s honestly not very comfortable, or practical, but if you want I can-”

“No, Tony, no I actually,” he pauses, reaching out to rest his prosthetic along the line of Tony’s jaw, “I…I know I probably shouldn’t, but I actually kinda like the arc reactor, not seeing it threw me off is all.”

Stark stares at the man like he’d grown a second head because- “you like the arc reactor?” He knew he didn’t sound pissed or accusatory, but honestly baffled, and Tony Stark does not get ‘baffled’.

Bucky seems to relax a little at seeing that Tony isn’t pissed, and nods, ghosting the tips of his right hand over where the arc reactor sits beneath the prosthetic skin, “it makes you unique, and I…I think it’s beautiful, and…and it makes you you and just shows how strong and brave you are, so…yeah, I like it…I really do.”

Normal people would say this is an improvement, Tony strides forward, other people would have me hide it all the time, throws his arms around Bucky’s neck, no one would ever think it beautiful, and kisses his boyfriend senseless, no one but you, anyway. Bucky easily steadies Tony, kissing back with as much vigor and desire as the smaller man that presses against him, the duo tumbling back on to the bed and break apart just in time to avoid any damage, giggling like elated teenagers as they do. Tony straddles Bucky’s hips, shoving off the parted sheer linen shirt from his broad shoulders, ducking his head to kiss along where skin meets metal before trailing his lips up the side of Bucky’s shoulder and neck.

“Tony,” his moan almost feels like a caress of its own, skittering across Tony’s heated skin and leaving raised flesh in its wake, and Tony rolls his hips when strong hands grip at them tugging them down onto Bucky’s lap. “What about the beach, doll?” Bucky asks, the words slurring together ever so slightly in between peppered kisses against Tony’s collar bones and jaw.

“Screw the beach, we’ll go to the pool,” Tony growls, shoving Barnes back onto the bed before slipping off his lap and onto the floor, coming to kneel in between the man’s thick thighs. “Right now, I just wanna show you how beautiful I think you are.”

Tony leans forward, nipping at the thin skin stretched taut across Bucky’s hipbone, tugging his swim trunks down as he ghosts his teeth across the other, drinking in the sound of the man’s hisses and moans. I love you, Tony thinks but doesn’t say, doesn’t dare ruin this moment between them, IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou, chants his mind as he flicks and swirls his tongue around the tip of the man’s stiff cock; letting Bucky buck up slightly past his parted lips, before taking Barnes into his mouth and to the root, the tang of pre-cum tingling the back of his throat deliciously.

“TONY!”
Tony felt the satisfaction deep in his bones, and couldn’t help but smile while snuggling closer against Bucky’s side, said man pulling him closer until Tony was all but on top of him. They were laid out on a pool chair a few hours after Tony had - successfully, if the singer’s babbling was any indicator - sucked Bucky’s brains out through his dick, warmed by the sun and each other, and Stark kind of never wanted to leave this moment. Tony chuffs softly, grinning against the swell of Bucky’s pectoral, the hand splayed across the man’s torso moving to trace along the scarred ridges of where metal meets flesh; Bucky doesn’t tense at the, otherwise invasive, touch, and Tony feels his heart beat just a little harder for it. However, Barnes does reciprocate, and traces lines along Tony’s lean back, talented fingers moving down to ghost over the swell of his ass before traveling back up.

It was strange to Tony, how one person could mean so much to him and give him so much without even realizing it, the thought becoming even more jarring when he realizes… *I don’t really know much about him, do I?* It felt like he and Bucky had taken a millennia to finally reach this point, but that wasn’t true, was it? No, *we hardly know each other*, he thinks with a surreal feeling, at least not the little things that Tony was told - that Pepper and Carol told him - mattered in a real relationship. *Do I want to know those things about him, though?* It was a risk, really, and Tony did the numbers in his head - numbers never lied to him - all of which pointed to one answer, the same answer every time. Tony, being a veteran business man, knew that every investment was a risk, a gamble of sorts; the bigger the investment, the bigger the return, or…the more devastating the loss.

Did he want that? To take that risk with Bucky? He’d already sworn to a man he barely knew he wouldn’t give up on himself, but to gamble his heart? And that question was…well, it was pointless, and Tony almost laughed at himself; the truth was, Tony was already all in, and if he hadn’t been before he damn well knew he was now. *He’s worth the risk, the hurt, hell he’s risking just as much by just being here.* Tony knew it was true, knew everything about this was a risk for both of them, even if their risks were different; so what would it hurt to get to know more about the man he was gambling his heart on? *Then get to know him, you idiot,* a voice - one that sounded suspiciously like Rhodey - insisted, *you’ll never know what you don’t ask.* But asking ‘what’s your favorite color?’ was depressingly boring (and an answer Tony already knew: red), so, Tony being Tony, of course came out of left field and aimed for broke.

“What was one thing you always wanted, but for whatever reason, never got?” Tony tilts his head up to look at Bucky, who ducked his chin to meet his gaze and raise a brow.

“Unexpected, but okay,” he chuckles softly, his warm palm coming to rest on the small of Tony’s heated back. “Well I mean I have *you* so-”

“No!” The genius whines, lightly swatting at Bucky’s chest, but feels his face burn a little hotter and *knows* the sun had nothing to do with it. “I mean, things like always wanting to go to the Eiffel Tower, or have a Sweet 16, own a Ferrari; stuff like that.”

There’s a moment’s pause, real contemplation taking over the singer’s face, and if Tony hadn’t been trying to get to know him better, that pout would have been enough reason to jump him all over again - the pool staff would just have to deal. However, before he could do much more than lean up slightly, Bucky answers.

“Well… I never got to give my ma a proper funeral, it killed Stevie more than it did me I think, because when his ma passed the three of us scraped and scrimped to get Sarah the funeral she deserved, but when my ma, Winnie, passed…” he trails, eyes focused somewhere in the distance, but Tony can’t tear his gaze away from the wistful expression on the singer’s face. “Stevie and I were over seas, Becca was barely making her college payments, and I hardly had enough to get by on a
good day back then so we did what we could, but…it still didn’t feel like enough.”

The answer stops Tony, thinking back to his own parents’ funeral, opulent and more of a spectacle than any funeral ever should have been, but he’d been happy his mother - hell, even his father - had been buried with grace. It twisted at his heart, picturing Bucky finding out his mother had died and not being able to be there for her or his sister, for the two siblings to not even be able to bury her right. He can see it, Steve and Bucky torn up over the news, but unable to do anything about it while being literally half way across the world; it grated against him, and just felt…unfair.

“So that, I guess…being able to give ma the funeral she deserved,” he trails off, not looking as upset about it as Tony knew he likely felt, probably trying to not make things awkward, the kind hearted idiot, Tony thinks fondly despite feeling like an utter tool for bringing back such a hard time in his life. “What about you?”

Tony blinks, “what about me?”

“Hey, don’t you go ducking the question you asked!” Bucky teases, voice light despite his hold on Tony being a little tighter than it had been earlier, but the tension coiling in the air relaxes so Tony relents.

“Fine,” the genius huffs, pressing himself against Bucky’s side and smiles to himself when he feels the man begin to relax against him, “but compared to yours it sounds utterly selfish.”

Bucky snorts, “humor me.”

Tony watches Barnes for a moment, he really had been expecting something far more simple, maybe something more along the lines of ‘I’ve always wanted to go to Italy’; something Tony could have maybe surprised him with- actually…he tucks the thought away for later. Leave it to Bucky Barnes to make his one wish the most selfless one imaginable; how is he with me, again? Tony wonders, fondly. Though Bucky bared his heart to Tony, and - for as stupid as it all seemed in retrospect - Tony wanted to do the same.

“I always….” Stark pauses, burying his face in the crook of Bucky’s neck because now it seems like such a selfish and childish wish, and can’t really bring himself to say it aloud with those earnest eyes watching him. “Oh fuck it, you asked for this; I always wanted one of those big public displays of affection.”

Tony expected a laugh, a snort or even a humorous huff, but instead Barnes just…hums, as though mulling the idea over, “how do you mean?”

You wanted to know him more, Stark, his mind - annoyingly - reminds him, it’s only fair that you share, too. Tony pulls his face away from Bucky, but can’t find it in himself to meet the man’s eyes, even though he can feel it against the side of his face as he stares up at the umbrella hanging over them, and breathes out a deep - but silent - sigh.

“When I was with Ty,” he starts, reminding himself not to tremble, Bucky wasn’t Ty, he’s never tried to hide you, “at first we were a secret, like he was embarrassed to be with New York’s party boy, y’know?” Tony feels Bucky tense beside him, but decides he may as well be forthcoming, he’s come this far, after all. “I understood that, the need to hide; I wasn’t exactly scandal free even back then, but…but even after we came out, we barely went to dinner together, and even then it only happened because we had to attend a function or business meetings; it was always only ever done to maintain appearances, never for just…us-”

“He never took you to dinner?” Tony can hear the disbelief, the shock, in Bucky’s voice - affronted
on his behalf, and wasn’t *that* an unexpected thought? No one - outside of his few friends - where ever offended on his behalf.

“Nope,” Tony answers with a pop of the ‘p’, trying to give off an aura of ‘I don’t actually care’ - even if he really, *really* did - this time finally facing Barnes, who stares at him, something unreadable in his eyes, “and Sunset only ever liked it when I took her shopping, I mean I was a nerdy teenager at the time so I got why, but…yeah….”

“So, you’re tellin’ me,” Bucky’s eyes flick across his face, before turning onto his side and props his head up on the palm of one hand, “you never had someone stand outside your room with a boombox?”

Tony grins and flicks the wall of his chest, “no need to rub it in, jerk.”

“Well *my* boyfriend gets all the glitzy and cheesy displays,” Bucky proclaims with a smirk, leaning forward to press a kiss to Tony’s forehead, and the smaller man couldn’t help but lean into the comforting feeling. “And I’ll never hide you, doll. I’d scream from the rooftops how proud I am to be with you.”

“With a boombox?” Stark chuckles but feels his throat catch, rolling onto his back when Bucky moves to hover above him and pepper his neck and chest in kisses, and tries to keep his smile from going wobbly at the fact that - somehow he knew, just knew - that Bucky meant it; that he really didn’t want to hide what they had.

“Anything *but* a boombox would be sacrileges,” Bucky proclaims, expression just as surely as his words, but it all crumbles when he snatches Tony closer and chuckles into his hair, the feeling of him smiling is enough to make Tony grin like a goon - Tony would never admit to how eagerly he kisses Bucky back when the man leans down to plant one on him.

“Aren’t you two just adorable?” A voice pipes up from behind, Stark and Barnes jolt but not apart, it’s almost endearing that Bucky’s stance goes from flirty and pliant to Protect Tony in less than a split second; *goddamn* I love you. “So Tony is the guy you never seem to shut up about, I get it now.”

“Ms. Fujikawa, it’s been a while,” Tony says with a grin once they’re sat up and he gets a good look at the familiar face standing over them, “I think the last time I’d seen you, you were still convinced blossom hats would make a comeback.”

“Oh shut it, Tony,” the woman snorts and rolls her eyes at his formality, they were never formal with each other, and the way she plants herself onto the pool chair beside theirs proves as much. “And I still *firmly* believe blossom hats will make a comeback, thank you very much.”

Rumiko Fujikawa was the daughter of one of Tony’s business partners in Japan, she’d lost her left hand in a lab accident - he’s slightly embarrassed to have forgotten she was a volunteer in the program, especially since he was the one who offered her the position, things have been crazy, a little absentmindedness can be excused. Rumiko and Tony practically grew up together in their teenage years, once Howard had struck and alliance with the Japanese, he’d frequent the country and dragged Tony along more often than not on the basis of ‘getting to know their business partners’. Tony knew better, even then, Howard was hoping he and Rumiko would shack up and make breaking the arrangement impossible, but it never happened.

Despite Howard’s plans to marry his son off, Tony and Rumiko actually did strike up a great friendship, they were snarky and relentless with each other, and back then Rumi had been like the little sister Tony never had. During those trips the duo were all but inseparable, always reeking havoc
on the poor unsuspecting scientists at the Fujikakwa labs, and dabbling in their own little experiments - teen gossip rags at the time always predicted they’d end up together, what a laugh, Tony thinks, like Rumiko would ever marry me, lord knows we’d probably drive each other crazy before the reception even began.

“Hey Rumi,” Bucky greets with a slightly flushed face, grinning at the woman who smiles back with a greeting of her own, and Tony almost wants to ask how the heck they knew each other until he realized everyone in the program knew each other. “Nat told me you were headed to town with Cabe and Frost.”

“We just got back, that’s actually why I’m here,” Rumiko turns her attention to Tony, the easy smile turning into a bit more of a sneer, “guess who we ran into? Period cramps taken human form, oh sorry, I meant to say Tiberius Stone.”

Tony feels his heart sink, what the hell was Stone doing here? Bucky’s hand on his shoulder is the only thing that grounds him, but it doesn’t get any better when Rumiko continues.

“He was asking Emma and Bethany about their prosthetics, and- no don’t look at me like that, obviously they told him to fuck off, but he wasn’t alone, Tones…” the tiny woman pauses, as though trying to find her words, before sighing and just pressing on, “he was there with two other people, I didn’t get a good look at the other guy, but I’m sure the woman that was there with them was Bain. Them being here, now? I…I don’t think that’s a coincidence, Tony.”

Tony feels his chest tighten just as his jaw does, and meets Rumiko’s eyes with a set determination, if a little fear, “no, no…I don’t think so either.”

*If they’re both here, that can’t mean anything good…for anyone,* Tony glances over to Bucky, *I won’t risk him getting hurt, any of them getting hurt,* Stark turns back to Rumiko who watches him in that careful way she always did, right before grinning.

“You have a plan, don’t you?” There’s a mischievous glint in her eyes, and Tony knows there’s a similar spark in his own, too - they used to drive Ana crazy with it, calling them her ‘Mad Scientists’ as she’d chase them with a fire extinguisher, and it seems the years on them hadn’t dulled that spark one bit.

“Don’t I always?”

Chapter End Notes

So as you might have been able to tell with last chapter’s titles and now this one, I wanted to expand a little on the going-ons during the Monaco trip; I always felt like I robbed the story of a good trip; I always felt like I robbed the story of a good trip, so I’m making up for it now, which might have been 1-3 additional chapter (this story is getting out of hand haha!). Fun fact: I have a notebook that I write my ideas/scenes/notes/etc. in, looking over the this story’s notes I literally have a note to myself FROM myself saying, and I quote “Monaco is a thing, how about you use it fuck face??” haha! So Past Me, I hope you’re happy and that you lovely readers enjoy the next upcoming chapters too! Xoxoox

P.S. Thank you to every one of you lovely commenters and readers and Kudos leavers! Y’all keep me excited about this story and I couldn't have done it without your support!!
Monaco: Let’s Make This Last Forever

Chapter Summary

Tony has more people at his back than he may realize, and Bucky decides to help in every way he knows how...

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm so excited about this chapter, I really hope you enjoy it and won't keep you any longer so onto the story!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To be honest, Bucky hadn’t had this good a day in years- well, actually maybe that wasn’t so accurate; Bucky hadn’t had a relaxed day in years. Even recently between all his appointments and just regular life, spending a full day with Tony was never really an option.

He’d hoped today would be an exception to the seeming rule.

At every turn Tony surprised Barnes, from laughing at his childlike mannerisms with his friends (past partners always told him to ‘grow up’), to outright getting along with his best friends - so many people in Bucky’s life treated his friends (his family) like they were just additional items to put up with if they dated Bucky, never as friends of their own. He remembered Rumlow literally flirting with Clint so brashly, so rudely, that the usually unflappable drummer not only got flustered but pissed - Bucky’d broken up with him half way to the ER. While Tony still got used to the idea of Bucky’s friends as his own, he never treated them as anything less, hell, it had been his idea to tell them what was happening with the poisoning. No matter how much Tony might have thought he still needed to prove himself to Bucky’s little patchwork family, they’d already accepted him as one of theirs, Stark just needed to realize it.

Bucky genuinely believed Tony didn’t see just how amazing he really was, it was something he’d slowly grown to realize, but didn’t fully understand how deep those insecurities ran; though today gave Bucky a clearer picture. It hurt, talking about his ma and how he’d felt like he failed her, but he hurt for Tony worse. Bucky knew he was being hard on himself about Winnie’s funeral, knew his ma would tell him as much if she’d still been around, but Tony got choked up at his declaration that he wasn’t ashamed to be seen with him; Bucky knows Tony well enough by now to know when the man was hiding how he really felt, and knew the genius was biting back tears. Tony deserved the sun and the moon and the damn stars in the sky, and his lousy partners hadn’t even taken him to dinner; it broke Bucky’s heart to think the man had been deprived of the most basic aspects of a healthy relationship, and silently raged at what the rest of those relationships would entail.

However, it was almost funny, how Tony’s words made his stomach flip with the juxtaposition it put his mind in; Bucky had been scared Tony wouldn’t want to be seen in public with him, and to find out the exact opposite was actually true was almost jarring. It seemed to be the way with so many their miscommunications and Bucky wanted to remedy that, maybe laying everything bare with no
room for misunderstandings or assumptions really was the best way to handle things where Tony was concerned. Though Tony’s little confession did give him an idea, and maybe Bucky wouldn’t have to wait to prove to Tony just how lucky he felt to be with the man; to prove just how much Tony really meant to him.

So, again, Bucky had hoped for a relaxing day with his boyfriend, an exception to the rule that was their crazy lives, but then Rumiko showed up, and well…

“I’m going to tear that smug bastard’s arm off and beat him with it!” Tony bellows, shoving his hands through his hair.

“Get in line, Tony,” Rumiko huffs, running a tired hand down her own face; apparently JARVIS had uncovered that Stone had invested heavily in Hammer’s prosthetics, but Rumi’s own quick digging proved Sunset Bain had, too.

And this is why I refused to work in the private sector, Bucky thinks, tired on their behalf. Bucky’s nice - relaxing - day by the pool with his boyfriend now turned into a scheming session, and between the four of them and Pepper on speaker phone, the language was very colorful but grave enough for Bucky to shove away his own disappointments. Today wouldn’t be an exception to the rule, then, but Bucky wouldn’t have it any other way - they could lazy their days away when this was all over, but for now, he needed Tony to know he had his back. However, Barnes wasn’t really sure what to do with himself, he was a grunt back in the military (Steve had always been the man with the plan), but even while Bucky knew he wasn’t any real help, he stuck around because Tony seemed to calm down with him at his side.

“Why don’t we just cancel the trip? Head home?” Cabe asks, but Tony shakes his head.

“Right now we have everyone, from the volunteers to the staff, all together and easier to protect from whatever that...that cabal have planned,” Bucky gently squeezes at Tony’s shoulders, running a hand down the length of his tense back, “but if we cancel this trip and everyone scatters, I can’t guarantee everyone’s safety."

“Tony’s right Bethany, the safest place for everyone right now is in Monaco,” Pepper agrees, but hesitates and sighs moments later, “but I don’t know if this is a good plan Tony, even if they’re there to mess with the prosthetics, I don’t think having Emma-” Pepper starts, only to be cut off by Frost.

“Ms. Potts, I understand your concern, but I’m a big girl and can handle myself,” the blonde in question reassures, no self-respecting New York kinkster didn’t know about the Hellfire Club, or the gorgeous Dominatrix that ran it with an iron fist; Emma Frost was a legend in her craft, even after losing her leg in a horrible car wreck, and someone Bucky had actually befriended during their time together as volunteers. “Stone’s been a long time customer at my club, and over the years he’s begged to be one of Mine no matter how many times I turn him down, so if goading him into spilling his plans for us means putting him in his place, I’ll do it.”

Tony watches Emma for a moment, seemingly at war with himself for asking so much of the woman, and Bucky understands why - Stone had messed Tony up badly, and it was clear he didn’t want to subject someone he considered a friend to that excuse of a man, “Emma, it’s a lot to ask of you, are you sure you’re okay with this? We can come up with something else, we can even if it takes a little longer, I will not force you to-”

“You’re not forcing me into anythin’, sugar,” the Dominatrix smiles at Tony in a way that seems almost vulnerable, an expression Bucky’s honestly never seen on her usually stoic face before, and leans forward to take Tony’s hand in her own, “you’ve given me back a major part of my life, and if
tricking that slimy rat is how I can repay you, then I’m more than happy to do it because I know I’ll enjoy the hell out of makin’ him cry.”

The group chuckle at that, enjoying the moment before Tony nods and runs through the plan one last time, “alright, Emma will dupe Stone into confessing what they’re up to, Bethany you’re on recon duty to see why they’re here and who the third person was with them, Rumiko I need you to dig into Hammer Tech through your connections; if Hammer’s planning what we think he is, I’ll be dinged before I even make it through the door,” the three woman nod, and Bucky was honestly kind of impressed by Tony’s strategic mind, and felt the pride he held for his boyfriend swell. “Pep, I need you to see if it’s possible to have the prosthetics unveiled during this trip if worst comes to worst, and see where Jeri and Matt are with their teams and if they’ll be ready in time in case this all blows. Does everyone know what they need to do?”

The three woman nod before leaving, already chatting for how they’re going to enact their parts of Tony’s little ‘mission’, while Pepper goes over a few details for her end before signing off, and it isn’t until it seems to all be said and done that the genius slumps over against Bucky. The singer wraps his arms around the smaller man, and honestly feels a little useless; it was clear Tony had friends and allies all over the place, even if the man himself didn’t realize it, and sitting around while Bethany and Emma, Pepper, Tony and Rumiko schemed proved as much. Barnes knew he’d helped ground Tony, but to see - to feel - the tension thrumming under his boyfriend’s skin and being able to do nothing about it was driving him crazy.

“Is…is there anything I can do, doll?” Tony sighs, snuggling closer to the larger man.

“You’re already doing it…” Stark trails, though he seems to pause before looking up at the singer, “actually…I’m going to have to go through this all with Thor and Loki, make sure they’re watching after the medical teams and their equipment incase Ty and Sunset decide to be juveniles and mess with them or their stuff, but…you already have a really good rapport with all the volunteers, could you and the gang watch out for everyone? Make sure they’re okay? I can’t risk any of you getting hurt, and…and you guys are the only ones I trust to keep everyone safe.”

Bucky stares down at the genius in his arms, and something begins not sit heavy and warm behind his breastbone; Tony trusted him. It was a silly thing to think when Tony had already opened his heart up to Bucky in more ways than one, but this? This was Tony’s legacy, the thing this beautiful man was fighting tooth and nail - was fighting death - for, and he was entrusting the safety of it to Bucky and his friends. Barnes didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry, but knew he wouldn’t let this wonderful man down.

“We’d be happy to,” Bucky whispers, leaning down to press a kiss to Tony’s lips, red and a little puffy from where he’d bitten at them during his planning. “Anythin’ for you, doll.”

“Thank you, Bucky,” Stark whispers against his lips, mouths a breadth apart, “thank you.”

They remain like that for a while longer, Tony and Bucky just soaking in the warmth of one another, kissing lazily under the warm Monaco sun until he genius hums and moves to stand. Stretching his arms over his head and giving Bucky a nice glimpse of tanned skin, before grinning and stripping his shirt off altogether; it was strange not to see Tony with the arc reactor and scars, the palladium lines could fuck off, but the rest of it…Bucky found beautiful and missed the sight of them. What he’d said to Tony in their room hadn’t been a lie, he really did think the arc reactor was beautiful, and yes it was for all the reasons he’d said, but it was also because it was a part of Tony and Bucky was in love with every inch of the man - scarred or no. However, it broke his heart to see the subtle lines of tension in his shoulders no matter how relaxed he tried to appear, just this morning everything had been perfect, and now it was all ruined - well, not completely but enough to upset
Tony - by those selfish jackasses Stone and Bain - Bucky may not have known much about the woman, and unless Tony decided to open up more about their past, Bucky would hate her on principle.

“I’m gonna take a dip,” Tony hums, looking out to the large, but vacant, pool. “Join me?”

Barnes smiles, about to move but holds himself, “gimmie a minute?”

Tony nods and saunters off, the sway in his hips both making Bucky chuckle and want to growl; Tony was unfairly gorgeous, and Bucky was happily helpless to it. However, Bucky had a little mission of his own, and calls up Steve.

“Hey Bu- Darcy I swear if you don’t- CLINT PUT THAT DOWN!” Bucky grins at the frantic, but honestly well-versed, Mama Bear that was his best friend likely try to keep their other friends from killing each other or getting arrested - if not both. “Sam don’t encourage them! Geez, sorry Buck, what’s up?”

“Y’know, I think you’d look good with white hair, all Anderson Cooper silver fox handsomeness,” Bucky teases, watching Tony wade into the pool before doing lazy backstrokes, “I think Pegs would love it.”

“Oh eat shit,” Steve huffs, but Barnes can hear the grin in his voice, “you’d think being abroad they’d behave.”

“That was mistake number one, Stevie.”

“This is true,” Rogers chuckles, and if Bucky listened hard enough he’s sure he could hear Sam screaming in the background, “what’s up on your end?”

“That’s actually why I’m callin’, Steve,” the singer sighs, pinching at the bridge of his nose for a second before looking back over to his boyfriend, “there’s a lot of stuff that’s suddenly going down and Tony needs our help-”

“Of course, Buck, whatever he needs,” Bucky pauses at Steve’s instant reply, it isn’t that he didn’t think his best friend would be willing to help, but it’s the earnestness that has him grinning like a fool and once again finding himself grateful to have Steve Rogers protecting his six.

“I’ll tell you all about it once you get here, Tony may need to be there to clear a few things up but…” the singer trails, waving back at Tony where the man pauses in his lazy strokes to wave at him and blow a kiss. “I was wonderin’ if you’d be okay with changing up the set list for tonight? I kinda got this idea, but I’ll need your guys is help.”

“Let me guess, this idea of yours, it’s for Tony?”

“You know about any other sassy mouthed geniuses I’m datin’ and tryin’ to impress?”

Steve snorts, it’s disgusting and Bucky loves it, smiling wider at the sound, “what did you have in mind?”

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Tony looks around him and smiles, everyone was having fun, from the Charles and Erik’s teams to the volunteers, and tells himself it’ll be okay, no matter what they’re planning, it’ll all be okay. Tony
had sat down with Thor and Loki explaining the situation to the heads of his security team, both men
looked about ready to tear someone in two (not something Tony would honestly put past them, but
he was right there with them at this point, in all honesty), but they accepted their roles in Tony’s plan
and instructed their teams to watch after the medical staff and their equipment. Bucky had been a
steadying hand on Tony’s shoulder when he explained everything to their friends, Tony had fully
been expecting the group to be tired of the drama that seemed to surround Tony, only for Natasha to
very calmly (read: very terrifyingly) ask for a picture of Ty and Sunset, for ‘reasons’ - Tony didn’t
know if he wanted to laugh or shudder when the rest wanted in on her request. However, they did
their part without question too, including a few others they knew wouldn’t kick up a fuss and remain
vigilant - for all their boisterousness Wade and Peter were surprisingly responsible when the moment
called for it.

Also, Natasha got the pictures, and Tony’s pretty sure he’d never seen a more terrifying glare in his
life, more shocking was that Steve gave ‘Tasha’s glare a run for its money.

Carol seemed to assign herself to the role of Tony’s personal bodyguard, and while he complained,
they both knew he was secretly grateful to have someone at his side whenever Bucky wasn’t. For all
his ‘growing up’ and ‘moving on’, Tony was still scared to be alone with either Ty or Sunset, they’d
both broken him in ways that were still shattered to this day, and knew - knew - if he was alone with
them, they’d know just how to dig into him to get whatever it was they wanted. However, Tony
stood with his chin up and shoulders squared, because he wasn’t alone and he’d do this - fix this - if
it was the last damn thing he ever did.

Tony sips at his cranberry soda, opting not to risk any liquor lest he lose his wits, and continues to
enjoy the easy company of everyone around him - closes his eyes to take in the positivity that
radiated from every person partying on the rooftop pool. He breathes through the tension in his
shoulders, tapping his fingers to the beat of the live music that washes over him against the rim of his
glass, and just tries to relax, it’ll all be okay.

“You said you’d bring the beach balls if I brought the pool noodles!” A young man cries out in
protest to the other model that hangs limply off him, catching Tony’s attention, the boy flushing so
hard Tony was slightly worried the poor kid may have an aneurism - Peter Parker, nineteen year old
child prodigy, Stark internship hopeful and currently attending NYU; lost his left forearm in the
childhood plane crash that killed his parents, now fitted with a Stark Prosthetic model IX.

“I did, but it popped,” mumbles the second model, but still doesn’t let go of the shorter brunet - Wade
Wilson, twenty-four year old former U.S. Army Special Forces; leg severed below the knee by an
IED, severe burns scarring over eighty-percent of his body, now fitted with a Stark Prosthetic model
IV.

I really need to learn more about these people than the research mouse equivalent of their Tinder
profiles, Tony thinks while his eyes skim over the besotted couple, eyes roving over the rest of the
models and crew shuffling and dance around the pool area. Tony had chatted with Peter on the
plane, the kid really was brilliant and so unlike Tony in so many ways that he knew the teenager had
a bright future ahead of him, even if his taste in partners was a little questionable - okay, where the
hell are these paternal instincts coming from? Tony you couldn’t even keep your pet rock alive, let
alone mentally adopt the kind who’s probably gonna cure cancer or invent time travel one day.
However, that didn’t stop Tony from glaring at Wade with the man planted a slobbery kiss on Peter’s
face, watching how the boy flushes and beams, okay, fine, they look ridiculously happy and now I’m
t kinda rooting for them.

“Conflicted on how to feel about about Parker and Wilson?” Carol pipes up beside him with a grin,
slouching against the bar next to her best friend, “trust me, you aren’t alone; everyone’s pretty much
torn between wanting to protect Peter and kicking Wade’s ass, and helping them write their wedding vows.”

“Good to know I’m not weirdly invested in my volunteers, well…not the only one weirdly invested, anyway,” Tony chuckles, taking a pull of his drink as they watch Peter and Wade squabble before Peter seemingly gets fed up and Sparta kicks Wade into the pool, Tony just about chokes on his drink laughing. “Kid’s got spunk, I gotta give him that.”

“Tell me about it,” Danvers laughs, taking a swig of her beer, eyeing the stage for a moment before looking over at Tony. “They’re really good, huh?”

Tony smiles, looking over his shoulder at the Howling Commandos on stage, playing through their setlist of originals and cover songs, “really good, I’m their number one fan, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh yeah?” Carol smirks, a twinkle of mischief in her dark eyes, though Tony has no idea why, “then why not join me at the front of the stage, if you’re such a big fan?”

Stark rolls his eyes, downing his glass and sets it on the bar top before spinning on his heels and following Carol closer to the stage, there really wasn’t any reason he wasn’t closer to the stage aside from the fact the wanted a drink. The song seemed to be ramping down to a close, and while Tony expected a new one to kickoff seconds later - maybe even break a sweat with Carol and the other volunteers and teams that decided to take advantage of the live performance and dance - there was only silence. The band stand around with their instruments, all of them watching Bucky with varying levels of glee, while Bucky clears his throat and calls for everyone’s attention.

_The heck are you doing, Bucky Bear?_ Tony thinks, looking over at Carol who can’t stop smirking, but the woman says nothing and shrugs.

“Sorry for the pause in music everyone, but I have somethin’ I wanted to say,” the singer starts, eyes scanning the crowd before landing on Tony where he stands a few feet away. “As you all probably know, I’m dating Tony Stark-”

“Kind of impossible not to, given how you never shut up about him,” Natasha mumbles into his mic, eliciting laughs from the crowd, and a middle finger from Bucky, but Stark can’t really being himself to react because _WHAT?!!_

“I wanted to dedicate this song to, well…to the best damn human being I’ve ever met,” for a second the billionaire genius forgets how to breathe, can’t hear any of the sounds or people around him; his world narrowing down to Bucky Barnes, “and wanted to very _publicly_ say how lucky I am to call him mine. You’ve changed my life, doll, and I’m gonna spend every day thanking you for being in my life…for takin’ a chance on my dumbass. Alright everyone, if you know the words to this song - and I’m _damn_ sure you do - feel free to sing along!”

Clint’s drums go off with an excited clattering of noises, quickly followed by Steve and Sam on guitar, and instantly Tony knows the song - everyone does - before Natasha and Bucky finally jump in. Everyone laughs, excitedly jumping and singing along, throngs of adults reduced to excited teenagers at the song that likely every one of them had on their mixed CDs growing up. However, Tony couldn’t bring himself to dance along, couldn’t tear his eyes away from Bucky - even if he had to blink through the damn tears - and it seemed the singer couldn’t either; Bucky only smiles wider at Tony as he sings, and knows it’s a smile he mirrors. For all of Tony’s thirty-nine years on this green rock, Tony never _ever_ thought Blink 182’s song ‘First Date’ would be a song to make him cry, but leave it to _Bucky fucking Barnes_ to prove him wrong in the best way possible.
It should have been so stupid, so cheesy and cliché that Bucky went all Heath Ledger 10 Things I Hate About You and literally sang to Tony, stood up their looking gorgeous and carefree with their friends; it was juvenile, almost cringe-worthy, and Tony loved it. I love him so much, I can’t believe he did this for me, Tony breathes a shaky laugh, but feels his heart pound in his chest with excitement, and throws himself at Carol when she wraps an arm around Tony’s shoulders. The brilliant smile on the blonde’s face is enough to tell Tony she knew about this all along, and the genius holds his best friend tighter as they both give in to their inner sixteen year olds, the duo singing and dancing alone with everyone else.

“When you smile I melt inside, I’m not worthy for a minute of your time,” Bucky winks at Tony, and the genius feels his face flush as he blows a kiss back, “I really wish it was only me and you, I’m jealous of everybody in the room…”

The atmosphere was euphoric, everyone on their feet and dancing along, and Tony couldn’t believe it was all real. With everything that was happening between the prosthetics’ line, the palladium poisoning, and Hammer, Tony almost felt like he was drowning, but there was Bucky pulling him out of the quicksand of his ever growing stress without even realizing it. Barnes was a dream of a human being, the kind of guy rom-coms dreamt up and put on screen for people to swoon over, but here he was in Tony’s life; he was real, and he was Tony’s. Stark knew he was in love with the man, so gone on him it was almost scary, and with everything that was happening Tony was too scared to push for more lest his greed cause him to lose it all. However, maybe Bucky really did feel the same way about him, because this? This wasn’t the actions of someone who wasn’t in love, even Tony for all his hardheadedness knew that.

“I’m going to tell him, I’m going to tell him I love him…my God I love him.”

“Forever and ever, let’s make this last forever,” the words fade out just as the cheering begins, Natasha steps up to her mic to announce that the band will be taking a short break, and Tony turns to Carol.

“I’m going to tell him,” he says without preamble, can almost feel himself vibrate with it, “I’m gonna tell him, Carol, but I need your help.”

His best friend’s excited smile softens at the edges, “anything you need, Tones.”

“I don’t want to do it here, I…I want it to be just us, can you tell him to meet me by the elevators?”

“So you two can scuttle away and hump?” Carol teases, barking a laugh when Tony flushes and nudges her but doesn’t bother denying it, the blonde pulls him into a hug, “I’ll get it done, go get ‘em, tiger.”

Danvers moves towards the stage, easily making her way through the crowd that congratulates the band on their performances, while Tony heads towards the empty alcove of the elevators. He feels almost jittery with nerves, but for the life of him can’t wipe his smile away. Maybe it was still too soon, maybe Bucky didn’t feel what Tony did to the same extent, but Tony must mean something to the singer for him to have done that. Tony knew it would hurt if Bucky didn’t feel the same, but at the same time, Tony wanted him to know; wanted Bucky to know that he loved him, no matter how this all ended. Since the fiasco at his birthday, Tony knew he couldn’t waste any more time, logically he knew it, but he still was; he knew he loved Bucky, and if these moments were going to be his last, then he was gonna tell him.

Tony hears footsteps approaching and smiles, pushing off the wall beside of the elevator he starts, “Bucky, I—”

The words die on his tongue as his knees lock up, no, nononono! He feels the soft slender fingers
run along his jaw before he can take another step back, before he can warn this person away.

“Oh Anthony,” Sunset purrs with a slight tip of her head to the side, stepping closer until her slender frame and sharp eyes are all he sees, her blood-red stiletto nails digging ever so slightly into the skin of his neck, “when will you finally learn?”

Chapter End Notes

UGHHH SSUNNNNNEETTTTTT!!!!! (■ 益■ ) This chapter was SO much fun to write, and I wanted to smack myself by the end, so I totally understand if I get a shoe to the head haha! You've probably noticed this story went from '24 Chapters' to 26, I don't THINK it'll go higher than that, so I'm keeping away from having it be '?' instead of a number, but I can say it'll be less than 30 chapters! Anyway, I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and I wanted to thank everyone who commented and continue to follow this story! You're comments are REALLY appricated! Love you all and see you next time!
xxoxoo
As a child, nothing really ever truly scared Tony, maybe it was because of the guileless that was so inherent in children that he never felt the need to be afraid; or maybe it was because he knew if thunder cracked too loudly, or his nightmares were too much for his young mind, he could run to Ana and Jarvis and they would sing to him until he could sleep peacefully. Tony never really knew why he didn’t feel fear as a little ‘tot’, like Ana used to call him, but he wasn’t free of that fear forever; at thirteen he wondered if he was handsome enough for the girls, or pretty enough for the boys, and felt fearful that he would remain alone. At fifteen he’d gone to MIT with a bundle of nerves staking their claim in his gut, scared that he’d be an outcast there just like he had been in all his other educational settings, but at sixteen Sunset had found him and that was a fear unlike any other.

Sunset was nineteen and gorgeous, everyone wanted to either be with her or with her, but she’d chosen Tony and for the life of him he didn’t know why, but suddenly Tony was terrified of losing her. Sunset plied him with reminders of how lucky he was to be with her, how someone so subpar and immature should be thanking her for being with them, and Tony did; he loved her, loved her enough that he believed every word she’d said. Rhodey and Carol stayed quiet about Sunset, knowing Tony wouldn’t listen and push them away if they tried to screw his head on straight, but he was a teenager in love and teenagers in love are about as rational as rocks. So, he’d stayed with Sunset, clung onto her more dearly than anything, had given her everything she wanted even if it left him living off instant coffee and ramen, but to him she had been worth it; at least, until Rhodey and Carol had had enough.

Tony didn’t see it happening, didn’t see the mounting insecurities or the weight loss, couldn’t understand how apologizing for speaking of things he enjoyed and putting himself down - in his ‘place’ as Sunset had always referred to it - was a bad thing; no one wanted to hear about his boring nerdy things, but sometimes he couldn’t help himself. It was what he believed love was, Ana had always told him love meant giving your everything to a person, and knowing they’d do what was best for you in return. However, Sunset’s love was warped and wrong, and it wasn’t until Rhodey pulled Tony out of a party - drugged out of his mind on something he’d never agreed to take - that it finally sunk in that Sunset never really loved him. It turns out she’d left the party hours earlier with someone else, and told that person’s friends Tony wouldn’t mind having a little ‘fun’. Carol broke Sunset’s nose for breaking her best friend’s heart, but Tony was broken far beyond just his heart, and
couldn’t recognize himself when looking in the mirror for the years that followed.

Despite everything, Sunset always had a hold on Tony, her words never truly leaving his mind. There were times after Tiberius that Tony believed she was the reason he’d given in to Stone’s false affections so easily (so willingly), because unlike her, Tiberius used actions instead of words, even when those actions left him nursing bruises and cuts for days after. At least with Stone the damage was only days long, but Sunset’s words hadn’t let him be for years; it felt safer, somehow, with Tiberius, knowing to restock on ice packs instead of wondering why he suddenly wasn’t good enough with a single glance. Sunset could rival any cult leader in history with her penchant for persuasion, and at sixteen Tony Stark hadn’t stood a chance, but he wasn’t sixteen anymore and knew her game so why…why couldn’t he stop listening?

“You don’t really think he loves you, do you?” Sunset asks, and Tony had his rebuttal on the tip of his tongue, but that’s where it decided to wither away, “oh Anthony, you’re just as gullible as you were when you were mine…you remember when you were mine, don’t you?”

Tony takes a step back, feels his back collide with the elevator buttons, and wishes some kind of wandering blackhole would swallow him up; nothing came to his rescue, nothing but Sunset closing in on him.

“You’re always going to be mine, Anthony,” Tony doesn’t know if it’s a shiver or a tremble that rakes through him at her touch, at the way her voice isn’t suggesting the words but reaffirming a known fact, “for everything that you blamed me for, Tony, I never faulted you. I never lied to you. I loved and took care of you, even after what Danvers did to me, I still cared for you, but you wouldn’t listen, instead you chose their lies over my truths.”

No, no! Carol and Rhodey would never lie to me! Sunset chuckles, it’s almost a cruel sound, and it’s only then that Tony realizes he’d spoken the words aloud.

“But they did, Tony, I know what Stone did to you, my poor baby boy,” her manicured finger tips ghost along his temple and cheekbone, “the way he beat you, but I never touched a hair on your pretty head…did I?”

“No, but-”

“I never forced you into anything, Tony,” he can feel her breasts grazing over his chest with every ragged breath he takes, and wants to shove her away, but can’t because…why can’t I move? “everything you did, you did to yourself; I never asked you to stop eating,” but you looked at me like I was disgusting when I did, “I never asked you to hurt yourself,” but you looked at me like I was worthless, “I never forced you to do anything, Anthony…I only ever loved you, didn’t you love me?”

You never treated me like I was good enough.

“I-I-” he feels Sunset’s warm breath fan over his lips, and feels himself breaking apart; she’d never hurt him like Tiberius did, but she destroyed the person he used to be with nothing more than her words and looks; broke him down in ways Ty’s fists never could. “I did love you, Sunset…but I don’t, not anymore.”

‘You’re worth so damn much, doll…you don’t even know’ Bucky’s words trail themselves through Tony’s head, and he thinks of his boyfriend, of the man who calls him ‘gorgeous’ and ‘doll’ and treats Tony like Tony’s something special; thinks of all the times he caught Bucky looking at him with the softest expressions when the man didn’t think Tony was looking. He thinks of Bucky and finally knows what Ana meant about love, why she believed in it so fiercely, and knew somewhere,
deep down, Bucky loved him too. Tony had given his all to Bucky, and the man had done nothing but care for him since, but Bucky had given Tony his all, and trusted Tony to care for him, too.

Tony sees the way Sunset’s jaw twitches, the crack in her nonchalant façade, and sees this all for exactly what it is, for what it’s always been with Sunset; an act.

“Get away from me,” Tony grits out, won’t give her a reason by touching her, and presses himself firmly back against the wall to escape her as much as possible. “I might have loved you, but you never loved me, Sunset. Now more than ever I see you for the actress you are, and it’s a bad one—”

Tony hears the crack of skin-on-skin before he registers the pain, hears a voice bellowing out before the pain finally spreads across his cheek.

“What the hell is going on here?!” Bucky shouts, standing at the mouth of the alcove to the elevators, pale eyes darting between Sunset and Tony.

“Nothing,” sighs the genius, palming at the heated skin of his face, “Ms. Bain was just leaving.”

“If you think he love you, Tony, you’re deluding yourself,” Sunset hisses before whipping around and leaving, ignoring Bucky’s glare as she passes him, and the sound of heels on marble doesn’t fully fade before Bucky’s at Tony’s side.

“Are you okay, doll?” Bucky asks, gingerly cupping Tony’s face in his warm large hands, and Tony can barely feel the pain over the thrumming of his heart.

Tony smiles, rakish and probably a little goofy but can’t bring himself to care, “never better, Bucky Bear.”

“Was that Sunset?” Bucky grumbles, pulling Tony into the firm barrel of his chest. “You said ‘Bain’, right?”

“That was someone from my past,” Tony buries his face into the crook of Bucky’s neck, “and not someone you need to think about right now.”

“Carol told me she broke her nose once…” Bucky trails, pressing a kiss to Tony’s forehead, “my ma raised me to never hit a woman.”

Tony pauses at the slightly disjointed statements before chuckling, “you’re going to ask Carol to do it, aren’t you?”

“You bet your perfect ass I am,” Bucky voice is almost vicious but Tony nearly doubles over laughing, and the singer calms a little at that, the tension leaving his arms and the lines of his body as Tony giggles against him.

Tony enjoys the display of possessive comfort for a moment, only to feel his chest tighten just as quickly, and not in the pleasant way it had moments before. Tony knew - knew - this sudden insecurity was baseless, but it hit him so hard and so suddenly that it took his logic longer than it normally would have to catch up, leaving him off-kilter and gasping. Tony was nearing forty - or really nearing death - and yet here way Bucky Barnes, young and spry wasting his time with Tony, you now he wants to be here, his logic finally manages, only for Tony’s insecurities to quickly rebuff with, but should he be? What if Bain was right?

“Tony?” The genius only holds onto Barnes tighter, feels his breath hitching, but doesn’t dare let go of the security this man’s arms offer.
“Bucky I…” Tony feels the words pushing at his throat, *feels* them needing to be breathed to life but- *godDAMN IT!* Tony yanks himself away from Bucky, the man staring at him at a loss, but *wants* to do this more than he can fucking *breathe*.

*It’ll be okay, Tones, it’ll be okay,* the words that trail though his head are the same ones Rhodey and Carol whispered to him all those years ago while he cried in their arms over Sunset, but back then he didn’t believe that they could ever be true, *maybe they are now.*

“You stayed, through all of this you *stayed* and treated me like I actually *matter* to you—”

“-of course you do, doll—”

“-you never thought less of me, you *gave* me a chance, and never gave up on me when when I gave up on myself. You believe in me, even if I have no idea *how* you do, but you *do* and Bucky I…I love you. I love you so much Bucky, I know it’s too soon, I *know* this can’t be the right time to say it when we don’t even know if I’ll wake up tomorrow, but I…I love you, Bucky Barnes,” Tony’s voice is trembling, hitching despite himself, but he *needs* Bucky to know this before it’s all too late.

Barnes stares at Tony, jaw working despite the absence of words, *I messed up, oh God I messed up so bad* and…*no, no I knew this could happen, I knew it but…but I don’t regret this.*

“You don’t have to say it back, fuck, maybe it’s *better* that you don’t with everything going on. You don’t *get* anything out of this, but I…I *need* you to know that I love you Bucky, that I’m *in* love with you and I don’t regret it for a single goddamn second because—”

“I get to be with you,” Bucky cuts in, drawing the genius for a loss and finds himself staring because he can’t mean that, he *can’t-* “*that’s* what I *get* out of all this, I get to *be with you,* Tony.”

“Bucky—”

“No, doll, you got to speak and now it’s my turn,” Bucky breathes deep, taking a step forward and seems to refuse to look anywhere but at Tony. “I shouldn’t have left the night Stone showed up, I know he hit you- no I *know*, Tony, and that’s a regret I’ll have to live with. But whatever *lies* he put into your head, whatever that bitch *Bain* said, it’s all *bullshit*; just *being* with you, around you, hell *seeing* you makes everything better. You’re so much more caring than you let on or give yourself credit for, and have a *damn* bigger heart than I think you know what to do with, bigger than anyone I’ve ever met and *Steve* is my best friend for Christ’s sake.

“When this all started I…I didn’t believe I deserved you,” Tony feels his palms sweat, but despite his need to interject - taunting voices that sound like Sunset refuting Bucky’s kind words right at the top of his tongue - he remains silent, heart battering in his throat. “From the utter *asshole* I was to you when we first met, to the first time we kissed; I knew I was *damn lucky* you chose to be with me, and it’s not something I take for granted, Tony. What I ‘get’ out of this is the fact I get to wake up next to you, that I get to *hold you,* and…” Bucky takes another step closer, watching Tony for a moment before gently resting a hand over his stinging cheek. “That I get to tell you I *love* you, Tony Stark...that I want to spend *whatever* time we have left *together,* be it weeks or years, if you’ll have me.”

Tony stares up at Bucky, mouth working but no sounds escape him, but none seem needed when Barnes steps forward he presses a soft kiss to Tony’s lips, and the genius feels his heart *pound.* Tony fists at Bucky’s shirt before yanking the man against him, the taller bracketing him against the wall he’d felt so cornered against minutes earlier, and presses up against Tony until their bodies flush against one another.
“Say it again,” Tony pleads against his lips, hips already rutting against Bucky’s thigh, please say it again, I need to know this is real. “Please say-”

“I love you,” Barnes whispers against his lips, thumbs stroking along his jaw, and Tony’s chest almost bursts with how elated he feels in that moment, “I love you so fuckin’ much, Tony Stark.”

Tony all but smashes their lips together after hearing Bucky’s declaration, each syllable sending lighting bolts down his spine, and knows that Bucky must feel the same if the hard press of his cock against Tony’s own is any indication. Bucky’s hips roll against Tony’s, the smaller man groaning into their kiss, tilting his head back when Bucky starts kissing down his jaw and neck - biting at his pulse point and marking his claim on the golden expanse of skin, a guilty pleasure he’d discovered and seems to enjoy exploiting, and one that drove Tony wild. Bucky groans when Tony fists at his hair, fingers tangled into the roots and tugging on just this side of painful, riding the delicious line of pain-pleasure that he knew drove Bucky crazy, and it seemed to make him redouble his efforts to do the same to the genius.

“I love you, Bucky,” Tony groans, arching his back enough that Barnes must feel the edge of the arc reactor pressing into his sternum, the probably only slightly muted between their shirts, “oh good God I love you so much.”

“We should head to our room,” Bucky purrs, grinning at Tony with such a sultry look in his eyes it makes his toes curl, “otherwise I’m gonna take you up against this wall for the damn world to see.”

“Gladly,” Tony grins, smacking at the elevator button and thankfully the carriage dings open seconds later.

The duo stumble in, Bucky’s touch - his hands, body, and that mouth - never leaving Tony for more than a split second at a time, bringing his hands down to cup Tony’s ass before lifting him and pressing him against the elevator wall, it would be impressive if Tony wasn’t horny to the point of delirium.

“Good Christ that’s hot,” the engineer breathes out raggedly, wrapping lithe legs around Bucky’s narrow hips, mashing their lips together in a frantic kiss.

It’s an interesting…journey to their bedroom, and while they may have scarred a nice old lady along the way - I regret nothing - the duo can’t stop pawing at each other, kissing and giggling like love sick teenagers. It’s when they stumble into the suite, Bucky pressing Tony against the door and stares down at him with such affection that Tony suddenly wishes Ana and Jarvis were still alive, wanting them to meet this miracle of a human being; they’d love him, I know it. Bucky picks Tony up once again before gently setting him on the bed, plush lips scattering kisses along his bowed-back neck, and oh fuck not now…FUCK! Tony’s breathing hitches, recognizes the telltale signs and feels like screaming, but instead shifts his hands from Bucky’s hair to his shoulders and gently presses.

“S-Stop,” Bucky immediately releases him, and once again Tony is reminded of how much Bucky isn’t like Tiberius and Sunset, he almost feels like crying with it, but that might just be because of how lightheaded he suddenly feels.

“What’s wrong doll?”

“The reactor,” Tony groans, already scrambling to pull his shirt off, and Bucky’s Game Face - as Tony had dubbed it, because it was both endearing and just a teensy bit scary - immediately takes over his face.

“Where-”
“-dresser,” Tony cuts in already working to pull the arc reactor out, trusting that Bucky will help and smiles to himself when Barnes just about scrambles over to the dresser to retrieve the familiar box. Racing back he holds it out for Tony to change the reactor’s chip, the device clicking back into place and it seems the instant relief is a shared experience when Tony gasps, shoulders relaxing, and after a beat of silence looks at Bucky sheepishly.

“Sorry, totally killed the mood, didn’t I?” Tony feels like smacking himself, but knows this isn’t something he can be blamed for, and Bucky must think as much with how he rolls his eyes.

“It’s fine doll, I’m just glad you’re okay…” Barnes chuckles softly, leaning up to press a soft kiss on his boyfriend’s lips, “wanna cuddle?”

“Cuddle? You had a boner the size of the Washington Monument two seconds ago, and now you just wanna cuddle?” Tony tries to keep the smile from his face, tries to look as incredulous as he made his words sound, but this man wanted to cuddle and Tony didn’t know if he could handle it; he was too perfect, too kind, and Tony almost felt like he was at a loss.

“We’re cuddling, it’s happening, deal with it,” Bucky answers for him instead, and the engineer can hear the fondness in his voice as he speaks and maneuvers them on the bed, until their both laid down and wrapped around one another with no room between them to spare. “This okay?”

“Now you ask that?” Despite his petulant tone, Tony just holds him tighter. “Sheesh, one second we’re about to tear each other apart, and the next he wants to cuddle-”

“-not my fault you’re so cuddly,” Bucky harrumphs and Tony grins wider, pressing his face against the singer’s chest. “What about the performance?”

“Clint may bitch, but they’ll understand,” Barnes hums, running cool metal fingers through Tony’s hair, and Tony feels himself slowly drifting; he’d never felt so warm and safe with another person before, and - for as cheesy as he knows it sounds - never wants this moment to end. Tony leans back slightly to look up at Bucky, knowing it’s likely childish to ask, but just wanting so bad to hear those words again.

“Can…can you-”

“I love you, doll,” Bucky leans down to press a lingering kiss to the man’s forehead, and Tony practically melts against him, the singer holding Tony tighter in return.

“I love you, Bucky Bear,” being able to say those words aloud, finally, and have them reciprocated by the one man who made Tony realize so many things about not only himself but love itself is…it’s a little overwhelming.

Tony buries his face against Bucky’s chest when the singer begins to hum a unfamiliar tune, maybe a new song he’s working on, he thinks and feels his eyes slowly drift close; Tony had never felt warmer or more at home than right then in Bucky’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! Damn that was a hard beginning, I’d actually nearly completely tossed out the original Chapter 22 and rewrote it in the span of one sitting, but I’m not going to lie, I’m really happy with this outcome. Some people believe physical abuse is the only
abuse, but emotional/mental abuse can stay with a person for decades, and sometimes for far longer than we even realize. Though I would say that with Tony, he'd had time to process both Stone and Bain, which is why his reactions towards them tend to flare up more so when they're around, but calm a bit once they're gone - and Bucky of course being there is a major help in that regard, as something tangible to a healthy relationship/loving person. I can speak from personal experience that it CAN get better, it takes time - so much time in varying regards - but it's more than possible to get better!

Anyhoo, I just wanted to thank everyone again! I LOVE reading your comments and hope you're enjoying this rollercoaster of a story as much as I am and I'll see you lovely humans next time! xxoxoo
Bucky blinks his eyes open, the sun filtering into the room enough to make him stir from sleep, and the inkling that he’s being watched only helps him wake further. With a grin Barnes pulls the warm body at his side closer, hearing a contented sigh from his lover, and cranes his head enough to press a soft kiss on - what must be - Tony’s temple before finally opening his eyes. Bucky doesn’t ever think he’ll tire of staring into those expressive brown eyes; Tony wore a mask when standing before the world, but here, with only Bucky to see, Stark was naked in a way he’d never been before - and Bucky knew he was damn lucky to bare witness to what this amazing man had to offer.

Last night had scared Bucky a little, one moment had been filled with nothing but elation and the next Tony was being cornered by a woman who hit him - speaking of which I need to text Carol. Tony’s life was a rollercoaster of sordid lovers, death and unimaginable genius, but Bucky didn’t think he’d have it any other way; Tony was perfect to him, the rest was just window dressing in comparison. Though to say last night meant nothing would be ridiculous, because last night Bucky finally got to tell Tony he loved him, got to break down that final barrier between them and Bucky just...the happiness he felt welling within him was almost to the point of hysteria; Tony not only knew how he felt, and felt the same.

“Please don’t let this be a dream, dear lord let this all be real-

“You’re staring at me like you’re about to whip out a glass of chianti and take a bite,” Bucky teases, both hands lazy caressing at the skin where they touched Tony.

Tony’s lazy smile grows wider, sucking through his teeth in a very good Hannibal impression, and the duo break out in laughter. Bucky tightens his hold around the brunet’s waist, pulling him onto his chest and presses a lazy but deep kiss onto Tony’s lips, the smaller man eagerly returning the gesture, and Bucky knows he’d like to wake up like this every day for the rest of his life- oh holy fuck, his brain short-circuits when Tony rolls his hips; yeah, Bucky thinks, grinning up at the genius, I could get used to this.

“I’m very tempted to make a ‘are you happy to see me’ joke right now,” Bucky rasps out, metal and flesh hands moving to grip at Tony’s hips, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“What’s stopping you?” Tony questions with a raised brow, a smug grin pulling at his kiss-slick lips, rolling his hips down lazily onto Bucky’s morning wood - their cocks moving together almost
torturously.

“You’re such a little shit,” hips bucking up against Tony’s, electricity zipping up his spine when Tony’s head ducks down and he groans against his collarbone, sinfully skilled mouth lapping and nipping at the spot, “I take it all back, I hate you.”

Tony snorts, tilting his head up to meet Bucky’s eyes, “you love me.”

Bucky reaches up to run his flesh and blood hand through Tony’s sleep mussed hair, feeling his heart flip around in his chest, and smiles at him, “I really do.”

Bucky watches as something seems to shift and settle behind Tony’s eyes, grunting softly in surprise when the man surges forward and kisses him, hard - almost desperate. Bucky’s no slouch, and gives as good as he gets, hands moving to rest on the man’s hips once Tony straddles his waist. The fiery mechanic ruts his hips against Bucky’s, bedsheets sliding down to pool around Tony’s waist, exposing miles of golden skin for Bucky to drink in, helpless to stop the moan that escapes him at the sight when Tony straightens up and sits back. Clever hands splayed out across the singer’s chest, gently kneading at the hardened muscles there, but Tony’s eyes never leave his face.

“I want you,” Tony proclaims, and Bucky’s brain stutters at the words for a moment, but only a moment.

“Are you…are you sure?” Bucky asks, hands gently running along his flanks, relishing in the way Tony shivers under his touch, but it’s the uncertainty in his eyes that holds Bucky back - for all their rolling around in the hay, they’d never gone all the way, their ‘sex’ generally remaining on the plain of hands and mouths and cocks, and Bucky had been fine with it. Tony had dropped hints during their time together that he liked bottoming, but there was always something - a kind of doubt or insecurity - that made the singer hold himself back from pushing for more. However, now…it seemed like something had changed, but Bucky wasn’t about to pressure his boyfriend into something he wasn’t ready for.

“I haven’t…I haven’t been with anyone like that since…since Stone,” Tony sighs, splayed hands curling into fists on Barnes’ chest, “which was long before Afghanistan, but I just- I couldn’t trust anyone, after him.”

“Tony we don’t have to-”

“I want to, Bucky.” Tony cutes in, voice trembling, but sure - that much is clear. “I trust you, Barnes, God help me, but I trust you with everything I have…and I want to, if just this one time-”

“Tony don’t say-”

“Please,” his voice is desperate, pleading, and Bucky would be a cruel man to deny him this - stupid to deny himself this, because, no matter his optimism, the lingering knowledge that Tony is dying is still a hard fact to refute; especially with the lines of the man’s very destruction all but staring him in the face. “You’ve teased me,” Tony leans down to press slow kisses up Bucky’s chest, “fingered me to the point of losing my mind, but never fucked me…” he pauses, inches away from Bucky’s mouth, “please, Bucky Bear…fuck me.”

“Okay,” Bucky shifts from under Tony, leaning up to kiss him, gentle but full of promise, “okay, but if we’re doing this, we’re doin’ it my way.”

“Your- ah!” Tony squawks when Bucky flips them over, holding himself above the inventor with the very same man’s incredible invention, and kisses him silent.
“Yeah,” Bucky breathes, smirking down at the brunet, “my way.”

Tony grins, crow’s feet wrinkling the corners of his eyes in a way that makes Bucky’s toes curl and chest warm, “I’m okay with that.”

Bucky’s kisses migrate from Tony’s lips, to his jaw, the tendons of his neck, before slowing at the scars and dark lines littering his sternum. Bucky lays a kiss on the center of the arc reactor; it may be failing them now, but it was also the very same device that kept Tony alive long enough for Bucky to meet Tony, and for that he would forever be grateful. Barnes moves onto Tony’s nipple, the other left to be teased by his metal hand, and drinks in every one of Tony’s moans, his flesh hand tracing the curve of his spine as he arches into the attention.

“Bucky…” his name had never sounded so beautiful, not until he’d heard it moaned by the man beneath him, and doubts he’d ever hear it said in such a way after Tony. Bucky’s hand traces down Tony’s flank, ghosting over his hipbone, before teasing at the short thatch of wiry hair at his pubic bone.

Pulling his lips and teeth away from a red-tinged nipple, he rasps, “where-”

“Bedside drawer,” Tony all but groans, hands roaming over any bit of the musician’s skin he can reach, words stuttering with Bucky pinches at his pebbled nipple, “the-fuck…the second one, not the first.”

“You expecting this?” Bucky can’t help but chuckle, smile widening when a faint blush creeps up the apples of Tony’s cheeks.

He grins, hands running through the tresses of the man above him, breathless, “call it wishful thinking.”

Bucky sits back on his haunches, slightly chilled metal fingers running over the hardened length of Tony’s cock, while his other hand gets busy rummaging through the bedside drawer; coming out successful only moments later. They both work to strip off their pants and underwear, both already shirtless from the night before, and Bucky drinks in the sight of Tony bare underneath him. Tony shifts around and scoots forward enough that his thighs lay over Bucky’s, laid out on display for the younger man who…freezes, fuck, Barnes not now! You can’t do this now! Barnes sees the way Tony’s smile falters slightly on his face when the larger man hesitates for too long, when Tony’s hands move to absentmindedly hide his arc reactor, and Bucky just about feels ready to ram his head through a wall.

“Bucky?” Shit, he inwardly screams, trying to find his words when he sees insecurity beginning to creep over Tony’s features; it kills him, because Tony’s perfect and has nothing to be insecure or worried about, now if Bucky could just tell him that. “Everything…okay?”

Speak you fuckin’ idiot! Nothing, nothing comes out of his face, fuckin’ speak you waste of brain cells! But how could he? Because right here, laid bare beneath him, eyes vulnerable yet…yet trusting was Tony - his Tony - and it suddenly hits Bucky just how much he loves this man. His wit, his humor, his genius; the way Tony snuffled in his sleep, or would argue with Pepper over just one more cup of Joe, Pep, I swear! Just one! Everything about Tony was everything Bucky wanted but never thought he’d actually have, because he was nothing more than a scared kid from Brooklyn who was - literally - half the man he used to be since returning State side, and yet…here was Tony, with his beauty and his…his perfection and Bucky just couldn’t wrap his head around it. However, it’s when Tony swallows, the clicking of his throat in the quiet room seems to snap Bucky out of his daze, giving him enough motor skills to snap out his arms and hold Tony down when the man begins to pull away from him.
Tony stares at Bucky, insecurity melting into a mix of anxiety and irritation, “Buck what the hell?”

“You’re perfect,” the words are rushed and bunched together, but they’re the truth, and Tony stares at him like Bucky’d gone wet in the head.

“Buck-”

“I’m sorry. I just—fuckin’ hell Tony, you’re perfect, and your here with me and I just… I needed to process that, okay? We’ve… we’ve never been like this before and I just… fuck, doll.”

Tony stares at Bucky for a moment, before rolling his eyes, and something about it sets Bucky’s teeth on edge, “Bucky, you have me, you don’t have to sweet talk me into sleeping with you, I’m literally spread out naked for you.”

“Sweet talk- why would—” the words die on Bucky’s tongue, Stone and Bain, is the answer Bucky finds and feels a whole new host of reasons why commenting murder wouldn’t be so bad. However, instead, Bucky surges forward and presses his body down against Tony’s, kissing the man beneath him breathless.

“Not tryin’a sweet talk you, doll,” Bucky breathes against Tony’s kiss-slick lips, “just tellin’ you the truth.”

“Buck-”

“No,” Barnes cuts in, voice a whisper but brooking no room for arguments, “I’m allowed to marvel over the fact I’m with the most beautiful… most intelligent… and most unbelievably kind man in the world.” Bucky nails down each point with a kiss that has Tony arching up against him, groaning almost desperately beneath him as he ruts his erection against Bucky’s hip, “and I’m allowed to be grateful that the man I love loves me back.”

“Bucky,” Tony rasps, this time not as an objection, but something torn between awe and gratitude.

It almost worries Bucky when he pulls back to see tears welling up in Tony’s beautiful doe eyes, but he’s smiling, so Bucky doesn’t say anything about it and instead kisses away the tear that escapes the corner of his right eye. Tony laughs, arms wrapping around Bucky and clutches onto him, making the broader man chuckle softly against the skin of Tony’s shoulder, placing a kiss there as well.

“I love you,” Tony whispers into his hair, his hold tightening a fraction, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, doll,” Bucky answers, just as reverently, before slowly pulling away. “Now let me show you just how much, hm?”

Tony snorts, unattractive and more endearing than it had any right to be, “finally.”

“Hey, good things come to those who wait,” Tony rolls his eyes again, but this time he’s grinning, and Bucky can’t help but return the grin.

“Make me ‘wait’ any longer and I’m gonna take this into my own hands,” Tony’s grin turns into a full-blown smile when the cheesy pun pulls a laugh from Barnes.

“Can’t have that…” Bucky says, forcing himself to pout despite the smile pulling at his mouth, and takes Tony’s flagging cock into his hand, giving it a firm stroke, “now can we?”

Tony’s back bows off the bed, the sight one Bucky would be hard pressed to ever forget once he’s seen it, and strokes his erection back to full mast, before bending forward to lick a wide stripe up
along the underside of it. Bucky watches the way Tony buries his head back into the pillows, but never daring to look away from Bucky, and tracks his movements as he reaches for the bottle of lube whilst teasing the head of Tony’s cock with the tip of his tongue. Bucky pats the side of Tony’s hip, pulling away long enough to give the man enough space to turn over onto his front, and shift his knees under him once he knows what Bucky wants.

Bucky’s a little distracted once he’s face to face with the perfection that’s Tony’s round and taut ass, but he’s pulled from his stupor when Tony grinds out his name, “Bucky.”

“So beautiful, sweet thing,” Bucky purrs, pressing a kiss onto Tony’s tailbone.

Bucky would be cruel not to give Tony what he’s so clearly begging for, so, being the gentlemen he’d like to think he is, he does. Oh does he. Barnes doesn’t hesitate a second before delving forward, eager tongue lapping and probing at Tony’s puckered hole, the tight muscle flexing as the man knelt before him moans and moans, back flexing and arms straining as he clutches at the bed’s mussed sheets. Tony’s stomach dips downward, pushing his ass - rather pointedly - at Bucky’s face, and the larger brunet chuckles softly - breathlessly - but gets the message all the same; hurry the fuck up, Barnes! Bucky coats his fingers in the scentless lubricant, cheeks wet with saliva from his attention at Tony’s entrance, poking his tongue forward one last time past the ring of muscle before pulling away, replacing it with a deft finger.

“Bucky!” Tony moans into the sheets, his voice slightly muffled where he presses his face into the mattress, moving back against his prodding finger.

Time to move this along, Bucky thinks, grinning at how vocal Tony is to his touches, and presses in another finger beside the first - he’s careful at first, sure he’d fingered Tony before, but never went past a teasing two-fingered scissoring; this time it’s have to stretch him properly. Stark was always beautiful in bed, so vocal and reactive to Bucky’s touches, and just a touch sassy with his demands; it drove Bucky wild.

“So perfect for me, doll,” Bucky hums, leaning forward to kiss and nip at Tony’s shoulders, “so perfect like this, naked and beggin’ just for me.”

“On- shit! Only for you, Bucky, ohfuckyesrightthere!”

It isn’t long before Bucky nearly has all four fingers inside his lover, the three already in him teasing at Tony’s prostate, drinking in the way Tony moans and writhes, all but screaming out in pleasure. God, Bucky thinks, worrying at his lower lip as he watches the man beneath him from where he sits on his haunches behind him, he’s gorgeous like this.

“I’m ready,” Tony grits out, grinding back against Bucky’s fingers, “please baby, I’m ready, wanna-fuck right there...feel you, I wanna feel you baby please...please Buck, please fuck me...” Tony trails off with a moan, turning his neck to look at Bucky over his shoulder, his honey-brown eyes blackened with lust. “I’m not gonna last much longer if you keep going and...and I want you.”

“Okay, doll, okay,” Bucky soothes, thrusting into Tony up to his knuckles one last time before pulling his fingers free, reaching for the bottle of lube and the condoms.

Tearing open the foil of the packet with his teeth, Bucky rolls the condom onto his aching length, coating it in lube; Tony’s prepped and flexing hole already dripping with the stuff when Bucky presses the blunt head of his cock against it. Tony groans and presses back while Bucky presses forward, the musician’s back bowing forward when the head of his cock slips into a near overwhelming heat of Tony, inching his way deeper in a cacophony of moans and groans from both men. Tony doesn’t move until Bucky’s buried in him to the hilt, shakily pushing himself up onto his
hands, Bucky kissing and biting his claim on the man along his neck and shoulders. Tony reaches a trembling had back, cupping Bucky’s jaw, and the man turns his head to kiss his boyfriend’s palm.

Bucky almost felt like his head was spinning, never in his life did he think he could feel so much during sex, so vulnerable and strong, near to tears and elated, all at once; he knew it was because of Tony, but couldn’t understand how this was all possible to feel. The phrase ‘making love’ always made the singer cringe, but this right here proved the vast difference between sex and lust and love. He felt almost at one with Tony, wrapped around the smaller man like this, cock buried deep in the heady heat of Tony’s body it was almost easy to forget where his lover ended and he began.

“I love you,” Tony cries out when Bucky thrusts forward, rutting his hips against the smaller man’s pert ass. “Harder baby, I can take it, yes! Oh fuck Buck right- yesyesyesYES!”

Tony reached for himself, but Bucky was faster and gripped his wrist, halting him, “Bucky please- I’m so close-.”

“My way, sweet thing,” Bucky whispers, shifting his hold on Tony’s wrist to intertwine their fingers, “you’re gonna cum on my cock, or not at all.”

Bucky’s metal arm grabs hold of the smaller man’s hips, changing his angle, searching, until Tony damn near screeches and Bucky smirks knowing he’d found what he was looking for - from there, Bucky’s relentless. Barnes is movements are slow and methodical; dead-on with each thrust into Tony’s warmth, heart thrashing in time with his thrusts against his prostate. Bucky’s hips meet the man’s ass with a thundering crack on each rut forward, a chaotic symphony, the music they make almost drowning out their belted moans and whispered calls for each other as they chase release - the slick feeling of skin-on-skin alone driving Bucky insane, he’s helpless to it all. To Tony.

Tony cries out beautifully each time Bucky fills him, his back muscles dancing like a live painting beneath golden skin, and Bucky is weak to it - a slave to the art that is his lover - and traces his lips against Tony’s sweltering skin - an artist with his brush, and just as thorough. Bucky almost feels like he’s losing his mind with the need to drive into Tony, fast and hard, to take everything this man has to offer that a long-dormant animalistic part of him screams out for. However, he doesn’t, wanting to draw out this moment, and memorize each sound the man makes, burn every jerk and movement of taut muscles into his mind.

It isn’t long after Bucky’s found that achingly-sweet bundle of nerves that Tony finally comes apart, pitching forward when his arm give out from under him, collapsing onto his front while coming onto the sheets. His body trembles with sensitivity, a raw nerve exposed, but not painful. Blissful. A moan rips itself from Tony’s raw throat, slowly tapering off, and Bucky gives him a moment before picking up the pace.

“Wanna see you,” Tony groans into the hotel pillows, shifting just enough to look at Bucky over his damp and quivering shoulders. “Please...wanna see you, Bucky.”

Bucky sees the slight vulnerability there, in Tony’s blissed out eyes, and Barnes knows he’d give the man the moon should he only ask. As painful as it is, Bucky slowly pulls himself free of Tony, the man doing his part to shift and turn over onto his back and spread his legs wide. Bucky doesn’t waste time, sheathing himself in Tony’s awaiting warmth once again, but he does stop to take in the man beneath him; they’d been together before, yes, but never like this. Never this close.

There’s a vulnerability to sex that most people lose sight to after years of growing calloused to the act itself, because even when naked, people can put up - if not keep up - shields; maintain their walls. To many - even Bucky - sex was just another...thing people did, and Barnes knows deep down that Tony knew exactly what that felt like; using another person to chase your own release, your own
little piece of nirvana, if only for a few minutes. However, here and now with Tony laying beneath him, chest-to-chest, Bucky knows that this time it’s different; for both of them - if only for the way Tony looks at him, lashes clumped together with unshed tears, and expressive eyes that left everything there for Bucky to see. The larger man leans forward and presses a kiss to Tony’s lips, their movements lazy but oh so perfect, and Bucky almost forgets himself in the simple perfection of it all. Feels overwhelmed, drowned in all that is Tony Stark, and this time…this time Bucky never wants to resurface.

“’m not so young I can go twice, Buck,” Tony teases, pulling away from their kiss enough to cup Bucky’s jaw and meet their eyes, “but I wanna see you come apart for me, can you do that for me, sweetheart?”

Bucky almost feels punch-drunk at hearing the words alone, but Tony’s words have his cock jumping to attention, almost as though saying hey, I ain’t done here, pal, and Bucky doesn’t waste any more time before thrusting into his boyfriend. Tony groans, hands coming up to clutch at both metal and flesh shoulders, and Bucky feels it all - feels Tony - as he falls over the edge; from the soles of his feet to the top of his scalp, the feeling of emotion and euphoria consume him whole in a way he’d never before experienced. It’s earth shattering.

“I love you,” his words are gasped, raspy and wrecked as his hips slowly stutter to a halt; raw, either emotion or exertion, he isn’t sure. Both, perhaps. “I love you so much, doll.”

“I love you too, honey,” Tony whispers, groaning when Bucky pulls himself free of his molten heat, but holds onto him, lazily kissing along the larger man’s jaw.

Bucky holds on, too, because Tony is heaven made tangible.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this moment of sexy times and sweetness! I feel like the boys deserved a chapter of just them enjoying their love, but don’t worry, my evilness ain’t done yet! *Maniacal laughter* Thank you to every one of you lovely humans for liking and commenting on this story! I love y’all and I’ll see you next chapter! xxoxoo
They stay like that for a moment, trading lazy kisses while Bucky remains propped up on his elbows in between Tony’s legs, the latter man slowly mapping out the muscles of his lover’s back. So, really, it isn’t his fault he misses Bucky’s words at first.

“What?”

“Let me take you out on a date, doll,” Barnes whispers again, his lips a hairbreadth away, but instead remains just out of Tony’s reach, waiting.

Tony stares at Bucky because…fuck, for all his earlier thoughts, going on an actual date with Bucky just has a kind of…weight to it, and- I could still die, at the end of all this.

“Maybe…maybe we should wait?” Tony loathes the look of hurt in Bucky’s eyes, but how can he not get it? “At least until after we find a cure...if we find-” Tony’s silenced with a kiss, and the fervour of it tells him Bucky was trying to make a point.

“Tony, we will, and I told you I’m in this for the long run, for...for forever, dammit.” He pauses, reaching up his flesh hand to run calloused fingertips across Tony’s cheek bone, conviction clear in his eyes. “So just- fuck, look I can’t force you to, Tony, but...will you go on a date with me? Please?”

And damn him to hell because how could Tony say ‘no’ to that look? To that damned hopeful-puppy-lost-in-the-rain look? Maybe it wasn’t the look, honestly, maybe it was just Bucky that Tony was a sucker for, but a sucker, nonetheless. Barnes must see Tony give in because the smile that stretches across his face is bright enough to power New York for ten lifetimes and then some, and Stark can’t help but chuckle when the man swoops down to kiss him while punching the air.

“Fine, yes, you dork,” Tony breathes out when Bucky pulls away, and would vehemently deny blushing even under the threat of death, “I’ll go on a date with you-” The two jolt in slight surprise when Tony’s phone goes off, the particular ringtone making him groan.

"Shit, that’s Pepper,” Tony bemoans, moving to sit up, “J, time?”

“It’s fifteen minutes to eleven, Sir,” the AI answers through Tony’s phone speakers.
“I gotta go babe, I promised Pepper we’d talk Expo stuff today and figure out the Hammer shit over brunch- fuck!” Tony isn’t sure how he hadn’t seen his boyfriend moving, but Bucky had somehow maneuvered under the blankets in the span of a few seconds, and was now molten heat around his dick. “Fifteen...fifteen minutes, then.”

“Make it twenty,” a low chuckle says from beneath the blankets, just before Tony looses control of his arms and flops down onto his back.

“I know that look, it’s not a good look,” is the first thing Tony says upon seeing Pepper.

“Well it isn’t good news, Mr. Stark” a crisp voice declares from behind the genius, making him whip around in surprise.

“Shit, Jeri,” Tony groans out, not because he didn’t appreciate the woman’s sharp wit and professionalism, but because he knew if she saw the need to fly out here in person that they were in worst-case-scenario mode.

“Shit indeed,” Rumiko hums, coming up beside Jeri with a plate of muffins from the breakfast bar, “it’s bad, Tony.”

Stark sighs, gesturing to the table when he sees Emma and Bethany coming up beside Rumi, even Erik and Charles pulling up behind them, “may as well take a seat and order something not suitable for midday, it looks like we’re gonna need it.”

Jeri places her phone onto the table, ‘Murdock’ written in bold letters across the top, before beginning, “I did a little digging after Pepper told me about what was going on, I used connections I have within Hammer Tech - people that aren’t Hammer’s biggest fans, don’t worry - about what that idiot is planning, turns out; he’s gunning for you, Stark, wants to shut this all down before it even starts.”

“It only confirms what I found out,” Cabe adds on, “that third person with Mr. and Mrs. Bitch Face? It was Hammer, Justin’s here in Monaco, the dumbass didn’t even bother using a pseudonym at the hotel they’re staying at.”

“I looked into Hammer Tech’s financials, turns out Stone and Bain are major shareholders in the company, so if it dips - or falls in the market all together - they’re screwed,” Rumiko sighs, taking a bite of a muffin, “iffss a mess, buh I don’ ssink- sorry, but I don’t think those asshats are beyond playing dirty to make sure you bite it, Tony.”

“It’s all true, last night I got Stone to give up some information, not much but enough; whatever they’re planning, it’s big, and it’s going to happen soon...Tony, he said it would be enough to ‘cripple Stark’. I couldn’t push for more lest he figure out what I was doing or break my rules of Play, but whatever it is they're planning, be careful, love.”

“Fuck, this is all my damn fault-”

“What do you mean, Tony?” Charles asks, voice as kind and gentle as ever and hearing it kind of makes Tony want to scream; he doesn’t deserve that kindness right now.

“Stone came to my home and tried threatening me about-...it doesn’t matter,” Tony scrubs a hand through his hair, silently wishing Bucky was there with him, but knew the man needed to do his P.T. more than coddle him, “what matters is that in the few minutes I took my eyes off him the fucker
went down to my workshop and saw schematics for the prosthetics’ line, I bet you everything I have that’s how Hammer found out."

“What’s done is done, Tony,” Erik waves the information away with a clear voice and hand, “now all that matters is how we can protect the volunteers from whatever they have planned.”

A voice clears over the speaker of Jeri’s cell, “not to pile onto the shit, but Foggy and I bit off more than we can chew with all these cases coming in, Stark, we’re going to need more hands on deck.”

Dear God I’m going to have an aneurysm, Tony thinks, but tries keeping his head on straight, the gentle hand and encouraging smile from Xavier helping a little, *talk about a teddy bear come to life.*

“Okay, okay, okay- *fuck,* okay!” Tony claps his hands together - right then Tony thanks his mother for teaching him skills in keeping a level-head in manic situations, and his father for making Tony learn how to improvise - and points them at Jeri, “Ms. Hogarth I know you well enough by now to safely assume you have your battle plans in order?”

“Of course.”

“Good, fire at will as soon as possible, Hammer being summoned to court should pull his attention away from us here long enough to go through with the rest of this,” Stark fires a finger-gun at Murdock (read: the phone, *why doesn’t Jeri have a StarkPhone? I actually feel kinda insulted*), “Matt, I have someone in mind that can help you and Foggy; Pep I need you to get in contact with Weying and Walters, they’re ruthless and always up for fighting for a good cause.”

Pepper already has her phone in hand by the time Tony looks overt Erik and Charles, “are any of the volunteers fit enough to go through a showcasing?”

Charles smiles while Erik nods, “there are a few we can recommend, but no heavy lifting.”

“Good, and there won’t be any, I won’t risk them hurting themselves this early in their recovery. We’re going to have to have to launch the announcement of Stark Prosthetics as soon as possible.”

“How soon are we talking?” Emma asks, and it’s a fair question, but one Tony loath himself for needing to answer when they’re still, technically, in baby steps, *dad always said you had to run before you could walk.*

“This weekend.” The eruption was expected, and Tony quickly acts to calm everyone, “I know it’s soon, but even with Jeri and Matt’s teams working to distract Hammer, we can’t risk losing any more time; we have to do this now, or risk not doing it at all. I just…you all know the Stark name, the bloody history behind it, and for most of my life I told myself it was just the way it was; that I was fighting on the side of ‘good’ and we know that was all bullshit, but this…if this program can be my legacy - and I know it doesn’t even begin to clean the red out of my ledger - then to me taking this risk is worth everything I am. *But* I know this is asking a lot, from all of you and I can’t do it without you, so I’ll scrap this idea altogether if you’re all really dead set against it.”

“You’re willing to lose everything, if we say no?” Cabe asks, and Tony nods - it almost breaks his heart, but he knows that without them he’d never have made it this far; at the end of the day these amazing humans would be his legacy, the prosthetics were just a way to help them along.

“This is a step I want to take, I *have* to, but I can’t do it alone; so the choice is yours to make,” Stark sits back in his seat, honestly too afraid to look at any one of them; they didn’t owe him anything, with Hammer’s cabal out there these people were putting everything at risk if they went along with
“I better be on that list, Erik,” Emma grins at the physical therapist, who smiles back.

“I’d imagine you’d look great on a catwalk, Em.”

“Oh, I get to wear those heels I brought! They’re so shiny!” Rumi giggles and Bethany gushes about a new ‘glare’ she thought would make panties drop.

“Murdock, until Jennifer and Anne get over to you, my team is at your disposal,” Jeri hums, waving over the waiter to order an espresso to go.

“Sounds great, Foggy’ll email over the stuff we need in a minute.”

“Oh Ms. Potts I think it would be beneficial to all the volunteers if we-” Charles starts but Tony can’t help himself as he interrupts.

“Wait, you’re all okay with this?” The genius is pretty sure he’s bulking at the group, he can almost hear his mother’s voice telling him to pick his jaw up off the table. “You know what you’re risking if you are…are you all sure you’re okay with that?”

Charles turns to Tony and smiles, “while I agree it is rather soon, I’ve personally seen how much your program has helped every one of the volunteers in so very many ways. Tony, this isn’t only your legacy but a chance to help millions of people across the world, of course we’re going to help, we’re your friends after all.”

Tony stares at the smiling faces around the table and feels his temples ache with the telltale sign of tears, but fights them back as best he can, “thank you, everyone…shit, I just- thank you.”

“Since we all seem to know our parts,” Pepper begins, looking around the table, “we should get started, Erik I’ll need that list so I can inform the volunteers.”

“Of course Ms. Potts,” Lehnsherr moves to stand, Charles giving Tony’s hand one last squeeze before he and his husband leave the hotel restaurant, Rumiko, Emma and Bethany saying their farewells as they leave too.

“I don’t have a selfless bone in my body, Tony.’” Hogarth sniffs, but a hint of a smile tugs at the corner of her lips, “but even I know a world changing idea when I see one, we’re going to tear Hammer apart and leave him for the vultures, that I can guarantee.”

“We’re with you in this, Tony, to the end,” Matt agrees before Jeri picks up her phone, turning off the speaker and talking to Murdock as she walks away, snatching up the small espresso cup from a waiter as she passes him.

“This is going to work, Tony,” Pepper reassures, reaching out to take his hand in hers, “I know it will, and we all have your back.”

Tony finally lets the tears fall, thanking whatever deity out there they aren’t raking sobs and just wipes at his eyes, “I hope so Pepper, God I hope so because…I don’t know what I’ll do if it doesn’t.”
it was. Stepping into the lavatory he strips off and steps under the shower, yelping when the cold water hits him before adjusting it to a near-scorching temperature, and can feel his muscles going relaxed and languid. *Oh fuck that’s good,* he moans to himself, resting his forearm against the wall and pillowing his forehead onto it; he hoped Tony didn’t have a big day planned for them, Bucky kinda just wanted to nap and binge on Netflix. Once all the conditioner, shampoo and floral soaps are washed away Bucky carefully steps out of the shower, already feeling his legs straining in their last moments of effort to keep him up - Erik’s team were good and *thorough,* and all Bucky can think is *I don’t think Basic was even this hard.* Drying himself is quick and perfunctory, stepping into sweatpants before flopping onto the living room sofa as his legs finally give out, sinking into the sinfully plush thing shirtless.

Where is Tony? Bucky thinks, head still resting against the back of the couch, but his eyes rove over the apartment-like hotel room, *he should have been done with his meeting by now.* Bucky shrugs off the worry, though he does shoot Carol a text, the two having gotten surprisingly closer as of late - though Barnes kinda guessed it was more to make sure he treated Tony right, and Bucky was totally fine with that, *happy* to know people were looking out for his boyfriend - but pauses when he sees an email notification from Pepper. His eyes scan through it, the email-chain seems to be comprised of a handful of the volunteers but, *wait, what the hell? I thought we had more time?*

“The hell’s goin’ on?” Bucky whispers to himself, sitting up when he hears the room’s door open, watching Tony shuffle in and asks, “the launch is happening this weekend?”

Stark pauses at the door and sighs, coming further into the room and sits next to Bucky on the couch before explaining everything, and the singer can’t help but pull the smaller man towards him by the end of it all when he begins to shake.

“Bucky what if this doesn’t work? I *know* Hammer and his goons are planning *something* and…and what if someone gets hurt-”

“It’ll be okay, doll, like Charles told me; one step at a time, hm?” Bucky soothes the man, running a hand through his mussed hair, “if anyone can pull this off, it’s you and Potts.”

“I hope so, Bucky…*God* I hope so,” Tony sighs, curling into the man, looking up at him after a lull of silence with a pleading look in his expressive eyes. “Take care of me, Bucky…please just…just make me forget, just for a little.”

Bucky leans forward and kisses Tony, slowly lowering him onto the couch until he’s sprawled out beneath him, “just focus on me, doll, I got you…I got you, my love.”

*We’ll be okay, Tony…we’ll be okay,* Bucky thinks, unsure if he’s trying to reassure himself or his lover.

“Today,” Pepper repeats with a chuckle, rolling her eyes at her former boss, striding up to him and runs her hands down the lapels of his tux’s jacket. “You look great, Tony.”

Tony doesn’t fight the smile that pulls at his lips, resting his hands on Pepper’s hips, and Tony knew he’d miss this once *if* he’s gone - *all the more reason to find a cure, don’t you think, Tones?* For all his misgivings, Pepper always forgave him, and he didn’t know how he’d have survived these past couple of days - hell, these past couple of *years* - had she not been right there beside him. It had been hectic, these past few days, Tony was running on coffee beans and adrenaline by this point but didn’t regret a *thing.* Though one thing still worried him; Hammer, Bain, and Stone had been oddly silent,
they must have realized by now what Tony and his team were planning so…why hadn’t they done anything?

“You look ravishing, Ms. Potts,” Tony flirts with his usual fondness for the woman, who smiles and shakes her head at him, the two are leaving his room when she takes his hand in hers.

“As do you,” the redhead says with a grin, intelligent eyes watching him when she adds, “I’m sure Bucky will have similar thoughts, hm?”

“I hope so,” Tony smiles, ducking his head for a moment to conceal the flush he feels licking at his cheeks. “The fact he hasn’t run away screaming after all this time is a miracle in and of itself.”

“Oh hush Tony, he’s so gone on you it’s bordering on obsessed,” walking out of Tony’s suite and down the hotel’s private elevator, she nudges him, “speaking of which, why isn’t he here to chaperone you?”

“Because we’re not going to our high school prom?” Tony teases, but shrugs as he presses the button for the ground floor, “he said something about needing to help Steve get ready.”

Pepper hums, delicate fingers tapping and sliding across the screen of her StarkPad, “I had your father’s plans for the layout of the StarkExpo digitally rendered, so you can introduce it to the guests without needing to lug the real thing around, give them a taste of the Expo now and have them wanting more later,” she casts him a glance as she adds, “you did include it in your speech, right?”

It was no small feat creating a venue big enough in Monaco to house all the invited investors, journalists, and guests in such a short time, but Pepper had worked whatever magic she swore she didn’t have and made it happen. The photoshoots for all the models had taken about two full days, but - much to Tony’s shock - none of them had complained, and those that were fit enough to model the prosthetics live were enough of a sample size and variety to have investors chomping at the bit. However, Pepper thought having this launch be ‘exclusive’ to who was extended an invite would not only build up the hype around it, but be a way to explain the lack of volunteers showcasing the prosthetics in-person; the news coverage of the launch would do the work of releasing it to the world until a larger more ‘grand’ showcasing could be done at the Expo; it was genius, and something only Pepper Potts would come up with on the spot.

I love her so damn much, and holy hell am I lucky to have her on my side.

“Yes mom,” Tony chuckles, rolling his eyes at the woman, stepping out of the elevator with her at his side, the duo following the crowds of guests into the event hall pausing for pleasantries along the way. “You never let me have any fun.”

“Oh please, if anything I let you have too much fun,” Pepper shakes her head, pulling her phone from her clutch after handing Tony the StarkPad, undoubtedly flicking through the night’s itinerary. “Alright, go over the specs, your speech, and Tony? It’ll all be okay, alright?”

Tony hums in acknowledgment and Pepper doesn’t push, knowing Tony would be in his head until all this was said and done, but he does pull the redhead in for a hug before they go their separate ways. Tony’s already pouring over the schematics, pausing every so often to schmooze with the invited guests and investors, playing up the prosthetics and encouraging them where to put their money; Tony’s old hat at this so it doesn’t take much energy, but it’s enough to distract his anxiety, for now. Tony comments and hums when appropriate, eyes flicking over the age old blueprints his father had made- wait a damned second…Tony scrambles for his ear piece from the inside of his jacket pocket, apologizing to a journalist before running off, to a calmer corner by the bar, and shoves the innocuous device into his ear hard enough to flinch.
“J you there?”

“Always Sir,” the AI replies, and the billionaire grins at his long time creation and friend, hands never stilling from where the pinch and flick across the screen of the StarkPad in his hands.

“Okay Buddy, I’m gonna need your help here; get rid of the parking lots, entrances, exits…structure the protons and neutrons.”

“Tony, earth to Tony! While I appreciate you looking over the blueprints, you’re supposed to be speaking with investors—” Pepper grouses, nudging the genius who continues mumbling to his AI when-

“HOLY SPOCK!” If Tony hadn’t been so elated, he would have laughed at the way Pepper all but jumped out of her skin, but as it were the brunette was grinning so wide and hard the redhead seemed concerned.

“Tony, what’s going on—”

“Pepper I solved it!” Stark cries, lunging at his best friend, who - despite her blatant confusion - hugs him back, “all this years and the man still one ups me, defiantly a bruised ego over here, but I’ll live…fuck,” Tony pulls back from Pepper, holding her arm’s length, “I’ll live, Pepper.”

Pepper stares back at Tony, confusion marring her delicate features until something akin to understanding begins to take hold, her own brilliant mind finally snapping Tony’s ramblings into place, and gasps.

“Tony, do you really mean…” her question hangs in the air, and Tony would hug her tight if it meant the mist in her eyes would dissipate, but Tony Stark had never been great with emotions.

“If it works—if it works, then yes, Pep.” Tony whips around and taps on his connections to JARVIS, “Hey J, send all this to Banner, Jolly Green will connect the dots, and schedule a plane for Malibu tomorrow morning.”

“Of course, Sir, and may I say? I am happy for you.” Tony grins and takes out his ear piece, turning back to face Pepper.

“Pepper, I…fuck, Pep, I really think it’ll all be okay,” Tony grins, waving at the bartender over for a glass of water.

“Shouldn’t you go tonight? Get it done sooner rather than later?”

“Nah, if I am right - and this is me we’re talking about, so of course I am,” Tony jokes with a bluster he hopes he isn’t being overeager about, “it’ll take JARVIS the night to synthesize it, and Bruce probably half a day to help put the bits and bobs together, there’s no reason I can’t stay here and see this through, and frankly, I want to see this through.”

Pepper smiles, pulling her best friend into a bone crushing hug - which surprises Tony a little given how tiny she is - who is helpless but to hug her back, “okay, the models should be out here soon to meet with the investors and I know for a fact Bucky will be thrilled—”

“Tony!” A familiar voice calls out, catching the brunette’s attention, who turns to see-

“Darcy?” The spite-fire woman looked slightly frazzled in her - blindingly - bedazzled gown, normally bored eyes suddenly frantic, and was - somehow more worryingly - followed by a just as contrite, if infuriated, looking Loki; Tony feels a sense of dread trickle down his spine, all hopeful
elation suddenly gone.

“What’s wrong?” Pepper asks, stepping up from beside him, speaking just as Tony does.

“Loki? What’s going on?”

“It’s Bucky,” Darcy answers before either man can, doe eyes rimmed red, and right then, Tony feels like the palladium poising finally stopped his heart.

Chapter End Notes

*Dives under blanket* I'm horrible, I know...I can't say much more but I SWEAR I'm not this evil in real life haha! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and thank you to EVERYONE who left lovely comments, I love hearing from y'all, and I'll bid you well until next time!! xxoxoo
Tony had made one promise when this all began, and it is an oath he swore he'd see through to the end...

Tony bursts into the models’ dressing room with Pepper, Darcy and Loki at his heels, the models all jump and swing around to look at him, each vet looking more morose and - frankly scared - than the last. The four shuffle further inside, and Tony thinks someone had shut the door behind them, but can’t think past the battering of his heart in his ears.

“Bucky?” Stark starts, rushing up to his boyfriend flanked by his bandmates, who looks up at him, lost and cradling his left arm, “what’s happen-”

“Tony?” The unsure voice of Bethany cuts in (Cabe never sounded so scared), and despite Tony’s frantic worry over Bucky, it isn’t only just him that’s been effected by…by whatever had happened.

However, it’s Wade that cuts in, snatching something from Peter’s hand and holds it out to Tony, “this is what fucking happened, we found it in the dressing room.”

“It was…was beeping or something, we thought it was something of yours and left it be, until the fucking thing went off and now we- our…our-” Carol tries to explain, stopping when her voice chokes up and clutches at her limp leg prosthetic, and Tony had never felt more gut wrenching sadness and fury than he had right at that moment.

“Our prosthetics gave out,” it’s Bucky who finishes for Carol, Stark’s head snapping over to his boyfriend from where he stands by Wade and Peter, the small device in hand, “even Clint’s ear pieces crapped out.”

Tony looks around, each of the volunteers lost and looking to him for answers, Tony feels his chest seize, “this doesn’t make sense, there’s no way my tech could have just…just stopped working!”

“I know, doll,” Bucky quickly jumps in, despite his limp arm, Tony is encased by a solid and warm arm around his shoulders, “we know, we all agreed it had something to do with that fuckin’ thing, it was just…a shock, is’all, for everythin’ to suddenly stop workin’.”

Tony is careful when he hugs Bucky, despite the man’s attempt to comfort him, he was trembling; voice shaking and Tony couldn’t even begin to image what all of them were feeling right then, parts of them that were literally apart of them just…suddenly giving out. It was a damn blessing none of
the volunteers - the vets - were having flashbacks or breakdowns.

“I think it’s a miniaturized EMP,” Peter starts, everyone turning to look at the brilliant young man, “I… I mean it’s the only explanation, but it’s not StarkTech, I checked- n-not to say you’d ever do something like this, Mr. Stark! I just meant-”

“No, you did good, kid. ” Tony cuts in before the kid can give himself an anxiety attack he looked like he was on the brink of, “from the looks of it, you’re right, which means all we have to do is reboot your prosthetics and- shit, are any of you in pain?!”

The prosthetics were wired into everyone’s nervous systems, and for them to suddenly stop working, even if only temporarily, could either be giving them all an insane case of phantom limb syndrome, at best, or at worst feel like their limbs were torn off. A silence fell over the room, tense and wrong, and Tony felt damn near to throwing up.

“Not…” Emma starts, the hand on her prosthetic twitching, “not pain but…”

“Something really fucking strange, and I don’t mean Scientology kinda ‘strange’, but, like, holy fucking shit my arm fell asleep and I think it’s comatose now strange,” Wade finishes, eyes skittering around the room, as though he couldn’t bare to look at the limp piece of tech - not that Tony could blame him.

“Pepper, get my case from my room closet, it has the SI logo and it’s painted red and gold,” Pepper flew out of the dressing room like a bat out of hell in thousand dollar shoes, so Tony turned his sites on his security team, “Loki, Thor, look over the security camera and see who the fuck left this damn thing in here. NOW!”

Tony yanks out a multi-tool kit he’d made from his jacket pocket and got to work on seeing how the EMP ticked - if he knew its strengths, its wretched tech, he could figure out the fastest way to help everyone. Tony felt his pulse ramping up, and knew the stress wasn’t helping his poisoning, but right then all he cared about was caring for his volunteers before his damned heart gave out - he was stubborn enough to believe he could do it, if a Stark couldn’t out-stubborn a heart attack, no one could. The genius went to work taking apart the small device and quickly discovered that Peter was right, the tech was nothing in comparison to StarkTech, but the microprocessor was familiar…so fucking familiar that it irked him and-

“Stark, I think I found the rats,” Loki cuts into his thoughts, the man whipping around to face his head of security who holds out a StarkPad and-

“Those pieces of fucking SHIT!” Tony all but screeches when he sees Stone and Bain exiting the volunteers’ dressing room, both looking more smug the usual - the Goddamn bastards, Tony internally blasphemes, glaring at the screen. “They snuck the EMP in here, but Stone couldn’t-Christ, Hammer, Hammer planned this.”

There was a sense of disbelief laced in Tony’s words, because for all of his slime-ball ways, Tony didn’t think Hammer would sink to possibly harming people to keep his prosthetics line alive, clearly I gave that refuse of a sentient trash heap too much credit.

“Thor-”

“On it,” the large blond was already headed towards the dressing room’s door with Loki, Steve and Natasha on his heels, and Tony felt a vicious sense of hope they’d be less-than-kind with the bastards when they found them.
Just as the group leave Pepper comes rushing in, Tony’s emergency Lab-To-Go in-hand, “what else can I do?”

“Stall the gala patrons,” Tony answers, but grips her shoulders as he begins to feel himself wavering, “but Pepper promise me, promise me, you’ll see this through. No matter what happens, you have to see this through, promise me Pep-”

“I promise, Tony,” the woman rushes out, though he can see the fear - the concern - in her bright eyes.

“Good,” he immediately gets to work on gathering what he needed at Carol’s side, “this shouldn’t take long, but we’ll be running behind schedule and-fuck!”

Tony stumbles, Pepper nearly dropping his case to catch him, but Bucky’s right there at his side to catch and steady him. But…but Tony can barely hear him with the rushing in his ears, his heart thrashing around in his chest, breath rattling his in lungs, and Tony tastes the bile coating his molars. Everything past his heart hammering in is ears sounding muffled, like voices spoken through a rather large pillow…sounds muffled and drowned out like he was under water and-fuck, not the time for flashbacks, BREATHE Stark!

“Sir, the stress is making your palladium levels rise-” Tony rips out his earpiece, cutting off his AI’s frantic words, he knows JARVIS only means to protect him, but he can’t listen to his AI when he’s trying to convince himself to breathe - despite the sharp pain that jolts through him for his trouble. I can’t work with my hands shaking like this.

“Tony! Are you okay? What’s happening?!?” Tony finally hears Bucky desperately prattling on through his haze, but shrugs the man’s worry away.

“I’m fine,” Tony rasps, I have to fix this, “I’m fine just give…give me the case.” I have to…this would have all been for nothing if I don’t.

“Tony-”

“Give me the damn case!” Tony snaps, and immediately regrets it, but taking the case when it’s handed over, “I’m sorry,” is all he says before rushing - stumbling - over to Carol.

“Mr. Stark-” the familiar voice of Peter Parker cuts through his panic, Tony snaps his attention overt the kid, thrusting the case into his - momentarily fumbling - hand.

“You help me with this and the Stark internship’s yours,” Tony’s pretty sure his offer crossed some - if not all - ‘bribery’ lines, but he was so far past caring he’d cackle at the thought, if he had the right amount of air in his lungs.

Parker looks like he’s about to object, but instead his jaw flares and his eyes come alive with a determination Tony felt a pang of pride over - a spark he hadn’t seen in his own eyes in decades. Peter kneels down beside Tony at Carol’s side, the woman’s worried gaze flicking between the duo, but not doubt, and Tony was grateful for it - he didn’t think he could handle her doubt in him right then.

“Wade, get over here,” Peter calls over his shoulder, the other man at his side in an instant, “I only have the one hand, so you’ll have to be my other; what do you need us to do Mr. Stark?”

If he didn’t know he was at death’s door, Tony might have asked Pepper to draw up some adoption papers, but instead he grins as best he can, “I’m worried the EMP fried the leg’s, for lack of time and a better word, ‘brain’, but I’ve installed a backup into each of my prosthetics in case of emergencies
or damage. It won’t be as quick to respond, but it’ll be enough of a fix to get Carol - to get all of you - through tonight and back into my lab to find a better and more permanent solution for when I’m not there to fix it.”

Tony looks up to Carol, asking for permission, only moving once she’s nodded before nudging her leg wider and carefully prying open a near-invisible panel on her inner thigh. Peter and Wade stand at the ready, both moving seamlessly to follow Tony’s instructions, and for all his idiotic commentary throughout, Tony cannot deny that Parker and Wilson work well together - and given the younger’s flushed face, Tony can surmise why that is. However, it’s at the final, delicate, part that Tony feels his pulse ramp up…feels his vision blur and blink behind his eyes and sits back on his haunches, instead feeling safer to direct Peter than risk causing Carol pain by fucking up - always fucking up…I should have seen this coming, prepared for it.

“FUCK!” Danvers all but screams, body jumping in surprise, and the trio jerk in surprise but…but her leg jolts right along with the rest of her. “I’m- crap, I’m sorry, but it just…the feeling just came back, it…it was a rush. Sorry.”

Peter and Wade yelp in victory, and Tony even feels a tired smile pull at his nerve-bitten lips, but…shit.

“Hey kid, you remember what we did?”

“Yeah. I think I can repeat it with the others, mine, and Wades,” Tony nods, bracing his weight back on his hands, the heels of his palms feeling fuzzy with the strain.

“You sure?”

Parker nods again, but this time his smile begins to ebb, “M-Mr. Stark? Are you- MR. STARK!”

“TONY!”

Tony’s pretty sure his name - the full thing, man that’s never a good sign - is yelled in unison from varying sources, but fuck is he tired…Peter’s got this, everyone will be fine…everyone...yeah, yeah they’ll be fine. Tony knows what’s happening, knows what’s coming next, or…well, what isn’t, but he’s at peace with it - what other choice is there? Tony feels himself being jostled, moved around with voices all around him, he’s sure he hears Bruce is name being yelled and man I wish I could have seen Brucie Bear one last time…it’s been a while. He manages one last glance around the room at these amazing and brave people (at his friends), before the light and exhaustion are too much and Tony finally gives into the darkness slowly swallowing him up; in that millisecond, the blurry shape he sees is one he knows by heart now: Bucky.

Don’t cry, it’ll…it’ll be okay.

Whoever he’d prayed to, all those months ago while drunkenly listening to Bucky’s music for the first time in his ‘shop, let him live long enough to fulfill his promise; ‘please let me live long enough to fulfill this promise…please, I’m begging you, let me do some good in my pathetic excuse of a life’, he remembered pleading, and maybe he’d finally done it, because his time was up, it seemed.

It was a strange thing, that feeling…indescribable, almost; the last thump before your heart stops beating.
*Holds icepack to face under covers* I expect and totally accept any objects thrown at me in this time, me and my evil ways deserve it. That said, I hope you enjoyed and I'll see you all in the epilogue! xxoxoo
Epilogue: Excelsior

Chapter Summary

All stories must come to an end...

Chapter Notes

This is it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky grins down at the crowd, they were about a thousand people present, the Howling Commandos were no Metallica, but they were on their way up. Steve - ever the optimist - thought if things kept up like this, they could quit their day jobs, which was a funny thought given all this began as a hobby. However, if the last year taught him anything, it was that time waited for no one, it sure as hell didn’t wait for you, Bucky thinks with a sigh once he’s out of view from the crowd, and it won’t wait for me, either. Being on stage was exhilarating, but the come-down - especially sans meet-and-greets, left him no reason to keep his energy up - always left him a little worse for wear. Bucky hands off his earpiece to the backstage technician and heads for his dressing room, he couldn’t be late, not tonight.

It had been a little over a year since the the prosthetic’s launch (Hammer lost the court battles, and Bucky was happy to report Hammer Tech never recovered), since…That Night - yes, the event was a title holder in Bucky’s mind, but how could it not be? When Tony…Barnes shakes his head, a little harder than he should have what with already feeling a little dizzy coming down from their live performance. He’d almost cancelled the gig all together, it was too much, on today of all fucking days, but Natasha and Steve had insisted he needed the normalcy of it. Loath to admit it, Larry and Moe had been right, Natasha hears you calling her Curly she will castrate you, a voice that sounds distinctly like Tony teases in his head, and Bucky bites back a laugh; Gods, I’m shaking. Breathe Barnes, Christ it’s been over a fucking year, you can’t breakdown every time you think about it!

“What am I even doing?” Bucky grumbles to himself in his dressing room, shaky hands running through his sweat-soaked mane; his hair was longer now, brushing at his shoulders, Natasha would sometimes mention offhandedly that he should probably trim it but every time he remembers that Tony liked his hair long, and doesn’t dare touch it.

I could do with a shave, though, the brunet notes to himself, flesh hand scratching at his scruffy beard, it’s the right thing to do, even if Tony wouldn’t have ever cared, Steve would probably pitch a fit. Bucky changes into his spare shirt and heads for his car, destination: Steve and Peggy’s place - that’s right, the two finally stopped dancing around it and tied the knot, Bucky swallows at the thought, it’s hard to believe I ever thought that could be us. His suit was there and he needed to shower, plus, he knew Steve would likely whack him over the head with a garbage can lid if he tried going by himself; lord knows Peggy wouldn’t hesitate. Rogers wanted to be there with him from the get-go, something about moral support, and no matter how much Bucky bitched about it, he was silently grateful - he honestly didn’t know if he could do it alone.
“Bucky,” a voice calls out, turning Barnes sees Clint jogging up to him from Natasha’s sleek new ride across the lot.

“Yeah?” He meant for it to sound more calm, nonchalant, not to glaringly on edge.

Clint doesn’t speak until he reaches his bandmate, and even then it’s only after what Bucky would say is a hairbreadth away from being less of a hug and more of a chokehold that the drummer speaks, “you’ll be okay, we got your back, buddy.”

Barnes swallows past the lump in his throat, Gods, I can’t be obviously scared…can I?

“We just know you too well,” Clint chuckles softly, as though seeing his thoughts, pulling back he pats Bucky on the shoulders one more time before running back towards Natasha - she even nods at him before dropping down into her car.

_I can do this, good Christ, Barnes it’s been over a year, you can DO THIS!_

“I fucking hope so,” Bucky whispers to himself, forehead resting against the steering wheel for a moment before straightening up and putting the car into drive.

It feels like a blur from there, it genuinely is, because Bucky wouldn’t be able to tell you what happened between putting his beat up car into drive and staring at his reflection while smoothing down the tie of his black suit. So yes, Bucky jumps about a foot into the air, but did not scream - Steve is a dirty liar, don’t believe him. Barnes whips around to face his best friend and glares hard, but crumples within seconds under Steve’s fucking Puppy Dog Eyes™.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Stevie,” Bucky sighs and - oh lovely - his voice cracks for good measure.

“Oh Buck,” the blond coos, reaching out to pull his best friend to his chest. “What happened at the prosthetic’s launch that…that hit us all, Buck, but it’s been a year…you can’t live consumed by it all your life; you know you can’t do that to yourself. You’re scared Bucky, and I get it, what happened to Tony…” Steve shakes his head as he pulls back slightly, enough to meet the brunet’s eyes, “I know you, Buck, I know you want to do this - need to - and I’ll be there right beside you, no matter what happens.”

Bucky stares at his best friend a few silent seconds, sniffing softly he swipes a hand at his eye and chuckles thickly, “since when did that punk from Brooklyn I had to drag outta back alley fights start giving TED Talks?”

Rogers grins at his best friend, shaking Bucky lightly by the shoulder before stepping back and smoothing down his own suit, “since I decided to make this selfless Brooklyn jerk my best friend, and have his back, ’til the end of the line.”

Bucky laughs, his chest feeling a little lighter despite the anxiety twisting up his insides, “lord you’re a cheesy fuck.”

“You love it.”

“You’re damn right I do,” Bucky sighs fondly, he still felt shaky, off kilter, but…it was now or never, really. “Let’s do this.”

Bucky’s legs bounced frantically, if it was annoying Steve, the blond didn’t say anything as he drove but Peggy looked about ready to _whap_ Bucky upside the head if he didn’t stop soon; _I can do this, I can do this, I can-_
“FLOWERS!” Steve didn’t swerve at Bucky’s outburst, but it was a near thing.

“What the fuck, Bucky!”

“What the hell, Barnes?!”

Steve and Peggy bellow in unison, but the singer ignores them both, “flowers! You bring flowers to things like this, oh shit I forgot, Pepper is going to fucking kill me and that irony would just be too damn sad—”

“Bucky!” Steve calls out, voice raised enough to pull his best friend out of his little spiral, “would you calm down? It’s fine, Pepper has everything handled, you just need to show up and be ready to speak.”

Bucky swallows, thick and tacky, but silently nods without further argument; why was he trying to delay this? Because you’re fucking scared, Bucky’s mind silently answers with a tone that sounds far too conducing to be his own head, it’s been over a year, Buck, you can do this, another voice - a soothingly warm, familiar baritone reassures him - and Barnes nods to himself like a madman but…I can do this, I…I have to do this- no, I fucking want to do this!

“So everyone’s already there,” Peggy pipes up from the passenger seat, Bucky shifts a little in his seat, and grips the woman’s hand with his prosthetic one when the brunette offers it in comfort.

“You’re the guest of honor, Buck, you’re not supposed to be there before everyone,” Steve reassures Bucky’s silent worry.

“I know, I just…fuck, never mind, I-I can do this, I fucking can!”

“Ayyy, there’s the Buckaroo I know and love!”

“Call me Buckaroo, and I’ll be dancing on your grave,” Steve barks a laugh but doesn’t try to mediate the ensuing banter between Bucky and Peggy, knowing it’s best for Bucky to get as much out of his system as he can before the night starts.

Bucky kept himself distracted with Carter-Rogers until Steve pulled into the parking lot of the venue, and all at once, he felt all the air get sucked out of the car; he wanted to throw up, it was a near thing, but Bucky breathed through it - as shakily as it may have been - and runs his hands down his thighs.

“I can do this,” he says to himself, getting out of the car, “I can do this,” he says, walking into the outdoor venue, “I can do this,” he whispers to himself through the bellowed cheers.

“I can do this,” he says, taking Tony into his arms.

“Happy birthday, Bucky Bear!” Stark says to Bucky wrapping his arms around Bucky’s broad shoulders, kissing him without a care in the world, “Bucky? Baby what’s-”

Over a year ago, Bucky thought the love of his life died in his arms.

Over a year ago, Bruce had synthesized and built the new element Tony had created with the instructions Tony had sent him before Hammer’s attack on their friends.

Over a year ago, Tony was taken by emergency helicopter to Bruce, Bucky never leaving his side, and watched the love of his life go from deathly pale and flailing on his laboratory floor to gasping to life and talking about coconuts.
Over a year ago, Bucky had moved into Tony’s New York home months after he had nearly lost him, and knew he never wanted to leave this brilliant human’s side.

Over a year ago, Bucky knew he wanted to marry Tony Stark, and tonight, Barnes drops down onto one knee in front of all their friends and family, bringing the cheers to an abrupt halt making everyone wait with bated breath; I can do this, time waits for no one, and I don’t want to wait any more.

“Anthony Edward Stark,” Bucky starts, and for the first time today, his hands don’t shake, his voice is steady. “I know we didn’t get off on the right foot, but at every turn you surprised me by showing me more and more of what a perfect man you are, what a good man you are; I was in love with you before I even realized it, and can’t ever imagine a life where I don’t love you, don’t have you by my side… Tony, will you grant me the honor of having me by your side for the rest of our lives and marry me?”

Tony slams himself into Bucky, lips kissing his own in between litanies of YES! and Bucky smiles so hard he cries, clinging on to this phenomenal human being.

Over a year later, the night of Bucky’s thirtieth birthday, Bucky Barnes marries the love of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh, I can't believe this story is actually over!! I want to thank you ALL SO VERY MUCH for coming on this journey with me! This story has been a joy to write, and an even bigger joy to share with y'all, and hear your thoughts about it! Thank you all SO MUCH for leaving such lovely comments, kudos, and seeing our boys through to the end! This story wouldn't have happened without you lovely humans, and I thank you for all your love, support, and shoe throwing haha! I love y'all so very much and hope to see you again! xxoxoo

End Notes

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