Unfeeling

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by whitchry9

Summary

"Have you heard of CIPA?"

Despite not being able to feel pain. Tony manages to get himself both a broken arm, and a broken heart, both courtesy of Steve. Which he can never ever know about.
Chapter 1

Tony was three when he realized the world he lived in was supposed to provide some feedback.

It might have been a bit early, but he was a genius, and he'd been getting the feeling for a while that something wasn't right. Because his mother would have cramps and his father would have headaches (hangovers, Tony corrected himself as he grew older) and even Jarvis had sore throats but Tony had none of that.

Tony was four when it was confirmed. Because he didn't understand why everyone looked so concerned when his leg was at a funny angle. Sure, it made it harder to walk on, but he didn't really care, so why was his mother crying, and Jarvis talking to him with soothing words, reassuring him that everything would be alright.

That was when his parents found out, when he didn't so much as blink when they yanked the bones in his leg back into place, only watching in fascination.

The doctors spoke to his parents outside of the room, where he sat with his leg propped up in plaster, a marker gripped tightly in his pudgy hand, wondering whether he should write the periodic table next, or Newton's laws. His lip reading skills weren't good enough to know what they were saying, but his mother burst into tears, and his father looked angry.

("Stark men are made of iron," he'd told Tony before, and Tony thought it meant they were unbreakable, untouchable, indifferent to everything.)

Tony was five when he found out what it was called. He devoured literature on the subject, but there was so little of it, and even less that was accessible to a five year old.

He was more careful after that, more careful with himself, even if Jarvis had been gentler with him ever since he broke his leg, checking him over during bath time to make sure nothing was out of place.

Because Tony was only five, but he still recognized that, in the end, the only one who would take care of him would be him.
Tony was thirteen when he tried to cure himself. Genetics were fascinating and everything, but once he figured out the gene that the mutation was on, he couldn't do much more than that. Human trials were messy things, and considering he barely hit puberty, he didn't think that was going to work with anyone who would have funded the research.

So he considered it an advantage, and when people asked, told them as much, no matter how untrue it was. (He didn't tell people about when he woke up with a mouth full of blood from biting his tongue during his sleep, or when he didn't realize his wrist was broken until the bruising became dark and prominent, and his range of motion was decreased. He didn't tell them about when he was younger and hadn't figured out a bathroom schedule yet, and had wet himself more than once because he couldn't feel that he had to go. He didn't tell people about having to use a thermometer before stepping in the shower, because otherwise he could die. No one wanted to hear those things, and Tony sure as hell didn't want to talk about them.)

So he let people poke him with pins, and remained completely straight faced throughout the entire thing. Sometimes he got fingers too close to welding torches, brushed by hot pans, rested on warm stoves. He ended up with a lot of burns that he didn't realize he'd received.

It became a nightly thing, checking over his body to make sure he hadn't irreparably damaged it again that day.

And maybe as he grew older he became more reckless, drinking to the point where his entire body meant absolutely nothing to him, more than once ending up in the ER because he lost too much blood from places he didn't even know were bleeding.

But Rhodey always took care of him, even if Tony had come to accept it at a young age that the only one who would care for him was himself.

But it was nice to pretend, at least for a while.
Chapter 2

Then came Afghanistan, and worries of undiscovered bruises and burns turned into fears of hyperthermia and febrile seizures, of not feeling the burning in his lungs until it was too late and being left with a chest full of water along with his newly gained shrapnel.

But then, it was kinda nice sometimes. Because really, waking up in the middle of open heart surgery with no anaesthetic was terrifying, but at least it wasn't painful.

He'd never been more thankful for it than he was then.

Yinsen seemed surprised, although grateful, at having such a compliant patient, but as soon as he realized why, it turned to apprehension.

“CIPA,” Tony told him, examining his chest with a mirror once again, to reassure himself that there was something there. “Although if we're going to get technical, it would be CIPPA. Congenital insensitivity to pain with partial anhidrosis. I still sweat, which is nice, but not as much as others. But no pain,” he noted, touching his fingers hesitantly to the pink healing tissue that surrounded the implant.

“You were unconscious for a long time,” Yinsen told him. “I was grateful, because he had no pain medication to give you. But this changes things. How can I tell if there is a complication if you cannot tell me what you feel?”

Tony shrugged, putting the mirror down, and tugging the gauze back up to cover it.

“Sorry. Don't know what to tell you though. I was pretty familiar with how everything should look, since I couldn't go by sensation, but you've gone Van Gogh and moved things around. I don't suppose you've got an x-ray machine hanging around?”

Yinsen smiled wryly at him. “No, they took it along with the coffee maker.”

Tony groaned. “I would kill for coffee.”

Yinsen patted him on the shoulder. “It may yet come to that,” he said quietly, and Tony's newly patched up heart stumbled at what it meant.

They came to an arrangement; Yinsen would check Tony out at least once a day, more if he felt like it, and Tony couldn't deny him that. In turn, Tony would absolutely for sure tell Yinsen if he felt anything, like shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, anything. Because maybe he couldn't feel if something wasn't right, but he could feel symptoms of an impending downward spiral.
Torture wasn't good.

Obviously, in the strictest sense, Tony knew that torture wasn't good. But when it was on him, the man who would never give in because he would never feel it, it was doubly awful. He would die before he would cry, simply because unless he saw it, he wouldn't even know what was being done.

His leg could be nearly amputated, and he wouldn't know, except for a slight feeling of imbalance.

But they didn't use knives and fire and electricity, they used water.

Water, which was pretty much the worst fucking thing they could use on a guy with a battery attached to his heart, but hey, no one ever said terrorists had to pass an IQ test.

Because he couldn't feel the burning in his lungs as they filled with water, but he could feel the thirst (maybe not the best word choice) for air. He could feel his mind slipping as it went on strike, demanding more oxygen than it was getting. And he swore he felt, or maybe it was heard, because his pulse was pounding in his ears, his heart skip a couple beats, hop skip and jump before his head was raised above the water and he could gulp in huge gasps of air that should have hurt.

He agreed eventually, because there's only so much you can take, even if you can't feel it. Because he could feel the wet rattle in his lungs, could feel the toll the repeated periods of no oxygen was taking on him.

So at the moment of greatest weakness he'd ever had (maybe, probably), he agreed.

Honestly, he should have agreed at the beginning, because these men, oh these men were stupid enough to give him everything he asked for, tools and equipment and parts, and they didn't even realize that he was authoring their very own disaster.

Because he didn't build them a missile, he built himself armour, and then he blasted his way out of that hellhole. They were going to. Both of them.

But Yinsen, and Tony's heart still clenched thinking about him, Yinsen had to be the hero, and despite Tony protesting, off he went and got himself killed.

Tony thought he was going to die in the desert, under the heat of the sun that was surely intolerable, but that he couldn't feel.

But by god, he'd never been so glad to be insulted in his life, as long as it was by Rhodey and he brought the cavalry.

Tony didn't die in the desert, but he did have broken bones he didn't know about, he did have bruises everywhere that he hadn't seen, and they wanted to keep him in hospital somewhere in Europe, but Tony wanted home.
And Tony generally managed to get what he wanted.

Home it was.

Then Pepper, because Pepper didn't know, and Tony couldn't have her knowing, because it was one of the few things in his life that was as close to normal as it could be, wanted Tony to go to a hospital.

Instead he ate a cheeseburger and held a press conference, and no one was happy about any of that, but Tony didn't care.

He took care of business, and made a new suit, because things weren't right in the world, and Tony wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to sleep, really sleep, again if he didn't fix them.

So Tony turned himself into the only weapon he was ever going to make again, and made sure he was the only one who could have it, because he never wanted to close his eyes and see more people who had died for him or because of him.

But Obie. Obadiah fucking Stane, waltzed into Tony's house and took the heart right out of his chest, and the betrayal hurt more than the removal of a vital organ could. (One of these things can be remade in a cave, and the other can't.)

But the mention of Pepper was more than enough to help him fight through, not the pain, there wasn't any pain, but through the impending collapse as he struggled to the workshop.

He swore he could feel the shrapnel in his chest moving towards his heart, but he couldn't, not the pain anyway, maybe the pressure, since he could feel pressure, but honestly how much pressure could those little tiny sharp pieces of metal exert?

Focus, he breathed to himself, which was easier said than done on account of the whole heart stopping thing.

Because even if he couldn't feel the pain or the shrapnel moving, he could feel the layer of fog settling over his brain, he could see the black spots that were invading his vision, he could feel the sweat soaking through his shirt because he was dying.

He didn't die, and Obie did, and the betrayal still stung for weeks afterwards, until Tony smoothed it over with bigger and better inventions and suits and upgrades to Jarvis so it could never ever happen again.

(He'd like to think it was gone, anyway. But those things stuck around, in the way he never let anyone near his chest, just in case. Damage can be hidden, but never completely erased.)
Chapter 3

The palladium poisoning didn't hurt, no matter how painful it looked, and Tony almost wished it did. Because maybe if it hurt, he would have paid more attention to it, done something besides ignoring it.

Cause maybe he didn't actively want to die, but he sure as hell wasn't fighting it too much, because it was so goddamn easy.

But then things happened and he was given the final push he needed to actively decide to live, and wow, look at that, things worked out pretty fine in the end.

(Okay, maybe he blew up half of the Expo, but whatever. Not his fault. And he was alive, and Pepper was alive, and Rhodey was alive, and honestly, Tony couldn't ask for much more than that.)

Earth sort of went to hell in a handbasket after that, what with the angry demi-god that decided he needed a playground, and hey, Earth looked available.

The Avengers happened, and they sort of saved the world, but they couldn't save all of them, and Agent died, the idiot, because he had to do the self sacrificing thing (and wow, that didn't remind Tony of anyone else in his past at all, nope, definitely not the man who went running through a cave with a gun to give him more time to escape) and that hurt more than his own, albeit temporary, death.

Because he did die, but it didn't hurt, because nothing did, but there was something in his chest (which he blamed on the near death thing) that ached afterwards.

And yeah, he'd always sort of understood that emotional pain could be just as, if not more, real than physical pain, and for him, it was the only kind of pain he had. He'd felt it before, a sort of hollow in his chest, when he broke up with a girlfriend that he thought he could make it work with, when his father brushed him off again and again, hell even when his parents died he didn't feel more than an ache.

But Coulson, Agent, Phil, made Tony's chest feel raw and open and burning, like he imagined the surgery would have felt. And it was strange, for him to feel that way, when his own parents' death hadn't been more than a simple hollowness, but maybe this was the first death that really hit home.

Or maybe it was just combined with his near death experience, and he was waxing poetic with the oxygen deprivation.

Whatever.

So he didn't die, and they sort of became a team thing, which was weird.
Because there was Captain America, the man he'd grown up hearing about, right there, completely real and just like his father told him. Because really, if anyone was the embodiment of perfect, it would be Steve Rogers.

And Tony kind of wanted to hate him for it, because growing up it was always 'Steve Rogers would never...' 'Captain America was braver...' 'If Steve were here...' and Tony was never good enough.

But Steve was actually that perfect, and it made Tony want to hate him even more, because honestly, it wasn't fair. He always tried to do the right thing and he was always honest and he was always brave and loyal and it made Tony sick, maybe because he knew how he looked next to him.

Because Steve's words stuck.

“The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.” “You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.”

But Tony proved him wrong, didn't he, flying that nuke into the portal, fully aware that he wasn't going to come back, and Steve... well, Steve was less judgemental after that.

But he still wouldn't call him a friend. They bickered, and Tony made fun of him, which maybe Steve didn't recognize, and they were generally in the same orbit, but never really connected.

But that was fine, because there were four other team members as buffers, and then whoever else happened to be in the Tower, and it was enough.

But Thor's statement about being ready for a higher form of war rang true, because it seemed alien invasion became a weekly thing. Certainly not on the scale of Loki's attack, and not always in New York, but aliens seemed to pop up around the world on a regular basis, and they were usually dispatched to fend them off, no matter the apparent threat.

Because they were dispatched one day to fight off cotton candy aliens (that's what Tony was calling them, and he didn't give a damn what anyone else said) in Brazil, and seriously, they were literally fluff balls, how dangerous could they be?

Okay, maybe they were kind of dangerous, because they kept respawning new ones, because all they needed was a bit of fluff, and bam there was another one. But they figured it out eventually, because damn those things burned beautifully, and it took them more than six hours, but they were all dead by the time they left.

He kept going and going and his teammates joked that he was an Energizer Bunny, at least the ones who knew what that was (Clint and Bruce, because Thor, Steve and Natasha had no clue, seriously, did that woman live under a rock?) and he didn't tell them it was because he didn't know when he should stop.
Pain was important. Pain taught lessons and let you know when to stop. Pain tells you where your limits were, that the joint couldn't bend that way, that the water was too hot, that you couldn't jump that distance without getting hurt.

Tony had none of that. He had to learn through trial and error, experiments involving x-rays and careful examination of his limbs. He couldn't feel temperature, he had to measure it.

(He thought it was one of the things that led to his scientific nature, his love of numbers and statistics and data, because he didn't know how to comprehend the world in any other way. Qualitative couldn't mean anything to him, so he had to stick with quantitative.)

He was Iron Man, and broken ribs could kill him easily before he even realized what was happening. Without the pain to warn him, he could crack a rib, and not know about it until the next fight, when it became dislodged and punctured his lung.

So maybe he ended up with three broken ribs after he didn't notice how hard the impact was with the super giant cotton candy alien that seemed to be the boss level.

It wasn't his fault, and really, no harm was done.
Chapter 4

It was a hellish day in the middle of winter when he killed a bus full of people.

It wasn't on purpose, because he would never, ever, do anything like that. But when it was the midst of a battle with giant rock monsters, and he only had one missile left, it sure as hell felt like he killed them when he had to choose between two targets: the rock monster that was headed for the elementary school, or the one that was aiming for the bus.

He chose. He chose and in that second, condemned those people to die. He essentially killed them, and he knew that everyone else on the team was aware of that. Because Steve was yelling in his ear about the bus, and Natasha was running into the line of fire to do something, anything, but no one else saw what Tony did, that the school was about to be crushed.

So he made his decision and killed a bus full of people. And maybe he saved a school full of children, but it sure as hell didn't feel like it.

The battle was essentially over after that, because as soon as the rock monster crushed the bus, Thor arrived from Asgard and dealt it a final blow with his hammer.

But the damage was done.

Rescue crews showed up, and they were dismissed from the scene as they started combing for survivors. Tony knew they would only find bodies.

He headed back to the Tower, not waiting for anyone else. Not wanting to speak to any of them, to have them judge him. After all, he was doing enough of that already.

Tony sat through the debrief in the kitchen silently. They used to hold them at SHIELD, but when everyone moved in, there was no point. The Tower had food, and it had all the Avengers, making it the logical place for meetings, especially post-battle, when all that everyone wanted to do consisted of showering and sleeping.

Tony was inclined to neither at the moment, going over ways to repair the suit in his head.

When Steve dismissed everyone else, he held a hand up to hold Tony back.

“Oui, mon Capitane?”

Steve blinked at that, before shaking his head. “Did you have anything to add to the events of what happened?”
Tony attempted to smile. “I think it was fairly self explanatory what happened. I didn't feel the need to go over it again in detail.”

Steve practically radiated disapproval. “People died, Tony.”

Tony nodded, once, sharply. “I know. I was there, remember?” My finger on the trigger, basically.

He stood up to leave, more than done with the conversation. He smirked at Steve, because he didn't know what else to do, and it was familiar on his face, and maybe if there was something familiar he wouldn't have the urge to start bawling in front of this man.

“Do you feel none of this?” Steve demanded, and Tony wanted to laugh. Because honestly, it was a funny question, and he knew that Steve meant emotionally, which of course he did, it hurt him more than a knife wound ever could, and yet, no he couldn't feel any of it, and he would let Steve in on the joke if he wasn't sure it would get him benched.

Instead he just rolled his eyes and made to move away, and Steve caught his arm.

“Tony,” he said sharply.

Tony tugged away, but there was no give in his grasp.

“Steve,” Tony said, exasperated. “I'm not heartless. This is just how I cope. Bruce meditates, Natasha shoots things, Clint shoots things and hides in vents, Thor goes to see Jane, you destroy innocent punching bags, and me? Well, I joke and try to pretend I don't care. But I do. Let go of me,” he ordered, and Steve obeyed, perhaps in shock.

Tony grimaced at the imagined pain, and stalked off to his workshop, because surely he could do something to prevent the events of the day ever repeating themselves.

When Tony glanced over his body that night, the beginnings of a bruise on his upper arm was present, in the shape of a very familiar hand.

Tony would have rubbed it in his face if he wasn't so sure it would destroy him, and even he can't handle a broken Captain America.
Chapter 5

The next day he was in a tank top in his lab when Bruce dropped by.

“Sup Brucie?” he greeted, waving a wrench at him.

Bruce stopped where he was, and blinked at him. “Tony, what did you do to your arm?”

Tony glanced down. He’d forgotten about it. The bruise was dark and prominent, standing out on the pale skin of his upper arm.

And it was clearly a handprint.

Tony swallowed. “Okay, so I know how this looks-” he began.

“Did Steve do that to you? Clint told me you had a fight yesterday, but I didn't think it was that bad.”

“It really wasn't,” he protested. “It was an accident”

“Tony,” Bruce warned.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You weren't there, okay? You know how he gets, all Super Soldier-y. He really doesn't know how strong he is. It’s not his fault. I shouldn't have provoked him.”

Bruce let out a sigh that was more of a growl.

Tony examined his eyes for signs of green. “Whoa, don't hulk out on me now. I'm a big boy. I can take care of it. It was an accident, and it sure as hell won't happen again.”

Bruce’s eye flashed dark, but he didn't grow or transform, and after a few deep breaths, he nodded.

“Tony, if anything like this happens again, I will not hesitate. Now, you are going to come with me and get it examined. And x-rayed, because I worry.”

Tony knew there was no getting out of that. He get his tools down and sighed, trailing after his science bro.

“A fracture?” Tony repeated, not believing what Bruce told him.

“Just a hairline fracture, but yes,” Bruce told him, tracing the thin line on the x-ray that Jarvis had displayed.

“Oh,” he said dumbly. “Won't need surgery though, right?”

Bruce shook his head, no doubt keeping his emotions barely in check.

“Sling and immobilization for a while though,” he said flatly. “Did you honestly not notice it?”

“Yeah, about that,” Tony muttered, scratching his head with his non-broken arm. Bruce was already adjusting the sling to his arm.
Bruce looked up at him as he trailed off. “What?”

“Have you heard of CIPA?” Tony asked quietly. “Congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis.”

Bruce’s eyes widened. “Tony, do you...”

“Well, technically I have congenital insensitivity to pain with partial anhidrosis, which is good, because I do sweat, which means I'm a lot less likely to just sort of die in my sleep or something, because I won't overheat.”

Tony knew he talked a lot when he was nervous, not that he would admit it, being nervous that is, and couldn't seem to make himself shut up.

Bruce had finished fiddling with Tony's arm, and sat down in a spinny chair across from him.

“It was sort of nice for the surgery in the cave, you know, no anaesthetic or pain meds, but Yinsen wasn't really happy because how are you supposed to know about complications if you can't feel them? So yeah, it's kind of an issue with fights and everything, but I have Jarvis for that, which is good. Coping mechanisms and all that.”

He shrugged, before realizing he shouldn't do that.


Tony examined him. He didn't seem angry, but then if he was really angry, he'd be at least three times as big, as well as green by now. So not looking angry didn't mean anything when it came to Bruce.

He ran over what he'd just told Bruce. Apparently he told him about Yinsen and what happened in the cave. Huh.

And maybe it wasn't angry that Bruce was looking at him with, but understanding, and maybe even some pity in there, which wasn't okay.

Tony scratched his head again, resisting the urge to stretch in his discomfort. “Um... yeah. So there's that. I kind of haven't told anyone else. I mean, Natasha probably knows, because there was that whole time when she my pretending to be my assistant, and was actually spying on me for SHIELD. She probably knows because Fury probably knows, since it kind of is a matter of record, not public record, mind, my father would have taken care of that, but still.” He shrugged, despite knowing a split second later that he shouldn't have. “There's always a trace somewhere.”

Bruce blinked at him, and Tony was very careful to not make eye contact, staring instead at the x-ray that was still displayed behind him.

“So... Steve doesn't know?” he clarified, after a long moment of silence.

“Um, no, that's what I just said, weren't you listening?”

“Tony,” Bruce said, placing a hand on Tony's shoulder, and he totally didn't jump, because he was stronger than that. “It's something he should know.”
Tony scowled. “I know that, of course I do, I'm a genius, remember? But that doesn't change the fact that I just really don't want to tell him. Cause then he'd been all concerned about fights and stuff and be even more super protective than he already is, and I don't need that Bruce, you know I don't,” he pleaded.

Bruce nodded. “I suppose you do have the suit,” he said slowly. “And Jarvis. I'd have to talk to him about the protocols before I feel comfortable with the whole thing, but seeing as how you've been doing this for a while already, I don't see how I can really have a say.”

Tony beamed. “Damn right. Steve doesn't need to know, because hello, I haven't died in a fight yet. I'll be fine, just like I always am.” Bruce didn't look entirely appeased. Tony raised an eyebrow. “Brucie... what's the issue?”

Bruce blushed, and stammered the words out. “But what if he hurts you... other times? You know...” he made a vague hand gesture, and it was adorable to watch him being so flustered until it hit Tony what he was trying to say.

“Bruce?” Tony asked, his mouth gaping halfway open. “Do you think Steve and I are fucking?”

Bruce blushed violently. “Um, well, the general consensus among the rest of the team...” he trailed off. “Mostly Natasha,” he corrected. “She was the one who confirmed it, or at least we thought so. But she knows things, her and Clint, and we had no reason not to trust her...” he trailed off. “Crap,” he sighed. “Clint won the betting pool.” He looked up at Tony. “Yes, everyone thinks you and Steve are in a relationship.”

Tony flung whatever was nearest his good arm across the room. It turned out to be Bruce's phone. “I'll fix that,” he said quietly. “No, I'll make you a new better one that can't break. Did it break? Probably not. Genius.” He sighed, slouching back in his chair. “Everyone?” he repeated.

Bruce nodded miserably.

Tony sat up, an idea startling him. “Oh Bruce, don't tell me that you thought Steve was hitting me?” he demanded. “Is that what you thought this was from?” he added, gesturing to his arm.

Bruce blushed again, and didn't reply.

Tony sighed, returning to his slouched position. “Well, thanks for being concerned about me,” he said finally. “Even if you jumped to a conclusion without all the variables.”

Bruce nodded. “I'm sorry,” he mumbled. “About that, and about the rest of the team thinking...” he waved his arm in the air.

“Not your fault,” Tony assured him. “How much did Clint get?”

“Oh, we didn't bet money,” Bruce told him.

When Bruce told him what they used instead, Tony nearly fell out of his chair laughing.
Chapter 6

Tony didn't want to leave the lab for at least a week, or whenever the bruise in the shape of Steve's hand went away, but the man seemed almost desperate to apologize, and Tony couldn't stand any more of him standing outside the door to his workshop, looking like a lost little puppy.

So he had Jarvis tell him that he'd be at movie night, and spent the rest of the afternoon experimenting with makeup to cover the bruise before realizing it was the middle of winter, and wearing a long sleeve shirt would solve half of his problems.

He knew Bruce would never let him get away with not wearing the sling, but he chose a dark shirt and hoped that it wouldn't be very noticeable.

Of course, he should have realized, on a team of a super soldier, two spies, and a demi-god, there was no chance of it going unspoken.

“Friend Tony, what has happened to your arm?” Thor boomed, his face furrowed in concern.

Tony waved the arm that wasn't in the sling dismissively. “Stone monster incident, nothing to worry about. Bruce fixed me up.”

He would have clapped his hands together at this moment, except one of them was sort of stuck, so he settled for clearing his throat dramatically. “But that's not why I'm standing in front of the tv. I'm here because some members,” he glared at Natasha and Clint as he said that, “Of our little team seem to enjoy spreading rumours that are not at all based in fact, and collecting on their mutual deceptiveness.” He frowned, wondering if that was a word of not, before deciding it was not of import. “I'm referring specifically to the spies sitting in the middle of my couch.”

Clint had the sense to look slightly ashamed, but Natasha looked nonplussed.

Thor was only confused, and Steve didn't have a clue that they were talking about him.

“Anthony, of what do you speak?” Thor asked.

“It has come to my attention that there was a friendly betting pool going on, as to when Steve and I would finally sleep together.” Tony ignored the way Steve turned bright red and appeared to choke on his tongue. “Apparently the wonder twins over here hatched a plan, and cashed in early.” He frowned. Maybe early wasn't the best word. Early implied that it was going to happen, and by the way Steve was turning purple in the corner of the sofa, it wasn't looking likely.

He flapped a hand. “Whatever. I'd tell you to give your winnings back, but you can't, because you didn't bet with money at all, did you? You bet with secrets, like any good spies would.” He held a hand to his arc reactor. “After my own heart,” he announced. “So instead you're going to have to let me in on those little secrets, or else I'll tell Fury that you tricked him, and I'm sure that won't go well, considering what his bet was for. Also, his little shipper heart might get broken, and we can't have that, can we?” He raised an eyebrow at them. “And if Steve can handle them, you can tell him too. He has a right to know, because he was the topic of conversation after all.”

In his corner of the couch, Steve had remembered how to breathe and was returning to a normal shade.
Tony didn't bother waiting for a response, but threw himself on the couch between Thor and Bruce, who was blushing slightly.

“So you and Steven are not participating in lovemaking?” Thor asked, a bit too loudly for Tony's liking.

“No big guy,” Tony told him, patting him on one massive shoulder. “I heard it was your movie night. What did you pick?”

Thor lit up. “Lady Jane suggested it to me, with a great deal of support from Lady Darcy. It is supposed to be most enlightening.”

Tony nodded, not sure if their definition of enlightening would be anything that resulted in an interesting movie, but hey, his phone was in his pocket, and he could always sleep if he got super bored. Thor was a great pillow.

Tony wasn't sure if Jane and Darcy were joking when they suggested the movie to Thor, if they were genuine, but somehow Thor believed it would be a genuinely enlightening movie.

Tony would call Monty Python's The Meaning of Life a lot of things, but he wasn't sure enlightening was one of them.

When the movie ended, Steve was the first one out of the room, and Tony didn't think too much of it, just headed to his lab to spend a few hours working on his suit.

Okay, maybe more than a few hours.

The sun was rising when Steve appeared, literally, like, just in a split second, at Tony's side, and he wondered briefly how the hell he'd gotten in while jumping a foot in the air.

“Steve,” he gasped, mockingly holding his chest for effect. “Heart condition. Do you want to kill me?”

Steve frowned. “I was calling your name for a good few minutes.”

Oh.

Tony shrugged. “I was busy.”

Steve softened, and dragged a stool over next to Tony's, which was never a good sign. Stool meant long visit, which meant dealing with Steve and whatever he had on his mind.
“Did I do that to your arm?” he asked, so quietly that Tony thought he imagined it, if it wasn't for the look of utter despair on Steve face.

Tony startled. “No, like I said, rock monsters. Big giant things, made of rock? Surely you remember them.”

“But that’s the arm I grabbed when we were arguing,” Steve insisted. “If it was already hurt, you would have felt it, and winced away. Which makes me think that I was the one who did it, and it didn't get sore until later, which was when you went to Bruce.”

Tony set his tools down, rubbing his face with his good arm.

Crappy decision time it was. Because Steve had a point, and he wasn't stupid, or oblivious. Tony couldn't lie to him like he could to Thor, because Thor took everyone at their word, never thinking that they would lie to him. Steve would wear him down, and in the end, lying would only make it worse.

But by god, how much worse could it be than the truth? That Steve was the one who broke Tony's arm.

It wasn't really that much of a decision.

Tony sighed, and hummed and hawed before speaking. “Okay, I'm going to tell you something that I don't really tell people. I told Bruce yesterday because I had to, and some higher ups in SHIELD know, so probably Natasha, but other than that, I don't tell people, okay?”

Steve nodded solemnly, and Tony sighed before opening his mouth again.

“I have this thing. It's a condition, congenital, so I've had it forever, but because of it, I basically can't feel pain. It's actually a really rare mutation, and kinda cool, but it sucks in other ways, because pain is pretty important. There are a bunch of different forms of the disorder, and most of the people with it can't sweat, so they risk dying from hyperthermia. But I have the even rarer kind, so I can sweat, but I still don't feel pain.” He glanced up at Steve. “So it's not that you grabbed my arm, and I didn't feel the pain, which led you to believe it wasn't broken then, that you did the damage, but it's the simple matter that I can't feel pain. Period.”

And okay, it wasn't entirely true, but he wasn't going to overwhelm Steve at this point by bringing up genetics.

“So how do you know it was broken already?” Steve countered, and damn that man was good.

“Jarvis,” Tony replied simply. “He's in the suit, and although I don't have x-rays, he can tell when an impact is enough to fracture a bone. He would never have told you about it, because I've sworn him to secrecy, but it's the truth.” Tony shrugged, and it was almost painfully easy how the lies came to him. (Ha. Pain.)

Steve considered it, his brow furrowing with new worries now that his initial concern had been abated.
“Tony, do you realize how incredibly dangerous this is for you?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Oh my god, no!” he exclaimed. “I'd never realized it. Wow, thank you Captain America for rescuing me from myself. I don't know how I've made it this far without you.” He looked up into Steve's eyes, looking as adoring as he could. “Marry me, and you can take care of me forever, my Prince Charming.”

Steve blushed, but it was a testament to his character that he managed to not simply run away.

“Not like that,” he began, but Tony was having none of it.

“I've already had a mother to take care of me, and I don't need another. I am a grown man, Steve, and I am perfectly capable of knowing my limits and working within them.”

Steve flashed angry. “Yeah, well how do you explain that then?” he said hotly, gesturing to Tony's arm.

*My teammate got a bit handsy, and didn't realize he's built like a tank,* Tony thought, but certainly didn't say.

“Rock monsters Steve. Rock. Monsters. There is no precedent for that.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Now get out of my lab.”

Somehow it worked, because Steve disappeared, and Tony returned to whatever he was doing before being so rudely interrupted.

Except he really didn't know what he was doing, and was also kind of really tired, and then fell asleep on the couch instead.
Chapter 7

He woke up and didn't really feel any better, but then it sort of was the middle of the night, and he couldn't remember the last time he ate.

So he wandered up to the kitchen and grabbed some food out of the fridge, and threw himself on the couch. Everyone else was sleeping, or elsewhere, and he was happy to be alone for a while.

He was channel surfing later when he came across a Supernatural episode, and Dean was bemoaning about something or other, probably his brother, because Tony had seen enough episodes to know what was up.

“I wish I couldn't feel a damn thing,” Dean said, through tears.

“Believe me,” he muttered, flicking to the next channel, “It's not all it's cracked up to be.”

Steve was generally okay after that. Or at least, in front of Tony, he was less... himself, if that was the right word. It really wasn't, but somehow, Steve changed slowly, from being Captain America to just plain old Steve Rogers, the kid from Brooklyn.

Tony kind of liked Steve. He hadn't realized it before, but he'd never really met Steve, the skinny kid who would do anything to fight in the war. He'd really only met Captain America, the man with a plan, stars and stripes and all of that. The very same man he'd grown up hearing about, the public image that Steve pasted on every time they did a press conference, or held a debrief or a team meeting.

And as much as Iron Man was a mask for him to hide behind (god, who was he kidding, it wasn't really, but his playboy exterior was) Captain America was the mask Steve wore.

Captain America was the one worried about the safety of his team, and the calls he made in battle, and how well the team worked together, but Steve was the one who wandered down to Tony's workshop and made sure he ate, dragged him up to movie nights, sent him to bed when he'd been up for super soldier lengths of time.

Even if everyone else knew about his... condition as an extension of Steve not being able to lie worth a damn, and Natasha finally admitting that she had known, Steve was still the one most concerned about him.
Tony's arm healed, and there were more aliens, and Tony didn't even get hurt fighting them, not that Steve would listen, because he still insisted that Bruce give him a full exam after he de-Hulked and stayed with him, fretting over everything, which was kind of nice, if Tony had to admit it...

Oh crap. Tony didn't just like Steve, he *like* liked him.

As soon as Bruce was done checking him over, he headed to his workshop to have a sexuality crisis. Not for himself, mind, he'd been pretty confident in his sexuality for a while. Because girls were nice, yeah, but so were guys. Honestly, he wasn't going to limit himself based on something as simple as gender.

No, his sexuality crisis was for *Steve*.

He helped himself to a smoothie with considerably more chocolate than usual and laid down on the couch, moaning to Jarvis about his plight.

“Oh god, what if he's not even gay? I mean, there was Peggy, and that seemed... real,” he said finally, recalling the look in Steve's eyes when he talked about Peggy, waiting for a dance. It was so sweet it almost made Tony sick.

“I'm going to make a mess of everything,” he moaned, burying his face in the couch, and Dum-E came up behind him and attempted to pat him on the back, which was probably going to leave bruises. The poor guy didn't know his own strength.

“If I may sir, that is not the only sexual orientation.”

Tony perked up at that, accidentally kicking Dum-E as he did. Another bruise then.

“Well then how the hell am I supposed to figure this out? Too many variables,” he groaned, his whining muffled by the cushion, which he suspected Jarvis was relieved about.

Jarvis offered no response.

Clint. He could ask Clint. Clint, who had a thing with Agent (who was dead not dead, because Fury was a bitch like that) would know what to do.
Provided he didn't shoot him first for just asking.

Tony considered it. Definitely a risk he was willing to take.
“Clint, I'm having relationship problems,” he moaned, having enticed the man into his lab with the promise of new arrowheads, and trapping him there until the problem could be solved.

Clint wasn't entirely pleased with the situation, and was perched on top of a work bench while Tony sat sprawled on the couch.

Clint glanced at him pointedly. “Really? You're coming to me?”

Tony waved a hand. “You and Agent,” he said, like that explained everything.

Clint snorted. “Seriously? We were a mess. We're still a mess. It took years and years for us to get our heads out of our asses and do anything about it, and it also involved Natasha locking us in a small room together.”

Tony blinked at him. That was new and very valuable information. He tucked it away for future reference.

“Well, help a friend avoid that experience,” he whined. “Do you really want my heart to be broken?” he asked, clutching desperately at the arc reactor.

“Dude, you can't feel pain. Nothing is going to get broken.”

“Ah, but you're wrong there. I can feel pain, just not physical pain. Emotional pain, yeah, like when Agent died. That fucking hurt. And it didn't just stop hurting because he turned out to be not quite dead yet. Emotional pain is a real thing Legolas.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “You're telling me you can get a broken heart? Great. That'll convince me to help you. But seriously, if this is about Tasha again, I swear she will use her pinky nail and皮肤 your-”

“No,” Tony said quickly, not wanting to hear the end of that. “It's not Natasha. It's just... I don't want to fuck it up, you know? Cause we're sort of friends, I think, and I don't want to lose that.”

Clint levelled a glance at him, and Tony tried his best to look sincere, but he was pretty sure it came across as pathetic and hopeless.

He sighed. “Fine. Who is it?”

Tony picked at the hem of his shirt. “Um...” he said, and wow, he was just getting more eloquent as the minutes went on. At this rate he wouldn't even be able to speak by the end of the increasingly awkward conversation.

“Pepper?” Clint guessed. “Hill? That one woman in R&D who keeps making up excuses to drop by while you and Bruce are in the lab?”

Tony shook his head, looking slightly appalled at the second one. “Hill? God no. She could do awful things to me, almost as awful as Tasha.”

Clint considered it. “I'm running out of ideas here. Is it even a her?”

Tony looked away, and that was all that Clint needed.
“Oh my god,” he said, gaping at Tony. “It is a guy. Yes! Coulson owes me a blow job.”

Tony winced. “Oh god, that is so high up the list of things I did not need to know that I can't even say.”

Clint shrugged at him. “I bet him you were bi. He didn't agree.”

Tony glared at him. “Just because I have a well known reputation as a womanizer does not mean—”

Clint cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Yeah, whatever. Moving on. So it's a guy.”

The realization must have hit him at that moment, because Clint gaped at Tony, made a choking sound, and fell off the workbench all in one fell swoop.

Tony groaned. “C'mon Legolas, don't be falling off benches now. Buildings are bad enough.”

On the floor, Clint was bent double, caught in the middle of laughter so violent it was silent.

Tony gave him a minute to collect himself, then kicked him gently.

“Stop laughing and get up. I need help.”

“It's Steve,” Clint said, still gasping. “Oh my god we were so right, it's Steve.”

Tony didn't dignify that with a response, simply crossed his arms and glared at the archer.

“I swear to god Clint, if you tell anyone, or if you don't get your ass off the floor and help me, I will never make you any arrowheads ever again and you'll be stuck with SHIELD ones, and I know what crap they are.”

That sobered Clint quickly, and he regained some semblance of control. He didn't climb back up on the table, but instead shoved Tony's legs aside and sat next to him on the couch.

“Wow,” he said finally. “Steve. Because no one say that coming.”

Tony scowled at him, just daring him to say another word.

“Right. Okay. So... Steve. Steve. I'm guessing your main concern is if Steve is even interested in you like that?”

Tony nodded, maybe a bit miserably.

“Oh yeah,” Clint confirmed, nodding confidently. “Steve is bi. Coulson sort of already had 'the talk' with him,” and wow, Tony could hear the air quotations, even if Clint didn't make them, “And it turns out Cap is really pleased that being gay is all well and good now.” Clint shrugged. “There was that whole thing with his best friend that never quite made it to the mainstream media, but yeah. Cap's bi. I swear Coulson nearly passed out at that, because childhood hero and everything, but he knew I was watching, and wasn't willing to risk an arrow in the ass, because he is mine.”

Tony nodded, because Clint was scaring him a bit.

Clint waved a hand, calming himself down slightly.
“So you're good on that front. It's just the part where you have to ask him out without him thinking you're making fun of him, and then go on a date that isn't destined to be a total failure.”

“Thanks for your confidence in me,” Tony muttered, but it wasn't entirely unfounded. He had fucked up a lot of relationships in the past, and this was one he desperately wanted to get right. Which was possibly one of the reasons why he couldn't ever have Steve know that he was the one to break his arm, even if it was an accident.

Clint slouched back on the couch for a minute, thinking. Tony was pretty sure he was thinking inside his head, and not out loud, but Clint picked up on his train of thought anyway.

“Steve broke your arm, didn't he?” Clint asked, glancing sideways at him.

Tony nodded slightly. “But he can't ever know. It would kill him. You know how he gets.”

Clint nodded beside him. “Yeah, I know. So how are you going to go about wooing him?”

Tony grimaced at his word choice, but had Jarvis display the plans he'd made so far.

It took most of the afternoon, but after a lot of arguing and compromise on Tony's part, but they finally had a plan that they were pretty sure would work on making Steve realize his super soldier strength feelings (Tony) and that wouldn't end up with anyone in jail (Clint, because there was no way he was getting that blow job then.)

Tony dismissed Clint, sending him with new arrowheads to try, and headed to his closet. Clothes were the first step. Then everything else would come after.

He wondered who was going to win the bet for real this time.

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