**What Comes After**

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### Summary

After Tony Stark uses the Infinity Gauntlet, he is transported to the Infinity Realm. There, he is given a choice: move on to peace and finally rest or go back and help the world rebuild. Well, Tony Stark has never been good at resting, and he has some unfinished business to attend to. And with a new threat looming on the horizon, it looks like he's back just in time. *(Tony and Pepper never married in this one, fyi.)*
I'm bringing Tony back, y'all. Here it is.

Notes

Hi! Thanks for reading. This was originally going to be a one-shot but I let it get away from me. So, more to come soon :)
Chapter 1

First came the pain, Peter clutching desperately at him, sobbing, begging him not to go, and Steve on
his knees behind him, looking on in utter devastation and he had wanted to say something, anything,
to both of them, but the darkness was already creeping in and the pain was nearly unbearable. And
then, nothing.

And then, inexplicably...

"Anthony Edward Stark."

He sits up with a gasp as consciousness is harshly thrust on him. He blinks and everything is dark
and he worries for a few horrible seconds if he's gone blind, but then a woman appears in front of
him and he realizes everything around him is black. It's a thick blackness, darker than anything he's
ever seen, the kind no light can pierce through. Once his vision adjusts he notices the tendrils of
smoke curling and wisping around overhead. And the bald woman in the yellow robes is staring at
him, completely unbothered by their highly improbable surroundings.

"You know me?" he asks, feeling a bit like he's repeating himself. The woman only smiles.

"You are Iron Man. The champion of the Infinity Stones. Defender of this universe. Of course I
know who you are."

He glances askance at her, and then at the hazy nothingness around him. "Where are we?"

She looks up thoughtfully, watching one tendril of smoke envelop another. She's smiling again, and
it makes the hair on his arms stick straight up. He fights off a shiver when his body finally realizes
how cold it is in this strange dark world. "We are in the Infinity Realm. This is where you come
when you have wielded the Infinity Gauntlet. Think of it as a limbo of sorts."

He snorts, despite everything. Despite the fact that he totally and completely believes her. Then, he
realizes he's been sitting in several inches of water, so he stands. Then... he realizes he is not wet.
And that is perhaps the most disturbing realization thus far. He clears his throat, trying to mask his
unease. She probably sees right through him but her expression betrays nothing. "So ... you're like
Charon or something? Here to ferry me to the Underworld?" He sweeps his arm in a wide gesture,
hoping for bravado, but his hand is shaking. He's still wearing the gauntlet in the other hand. It hangs
like a dead weight at his side. There is no pain here, but there is an immense heaviness that settles
over everything. He feels it pulling at him even now, threatening to drag him down into the murky
depths below.

She smiles. "I am only here to inform you that you have some say in the matter of what happens
next."

"And what the hell does that mean," he asks, never one to show how intimidated he actually is in
any situation (even in death apparently). He's still a businessman, after all. Iron Man isn't his only
mask.

"It means - you have a choice. You can pass on and finally rest, knowing you've fought well and
died a hero. Or ..." She looks at him with something akin to anticipation. It makes his skin crawl.

"Or what?" he says bitingly.

"Or ... you can go back."
Something in his brain short-circuits. He stands, blinking, mouth open. He feels like an idiot, probably looks comical, but … “What did you just say?”

Another smile, perhaps more indulgent this time. “I said … you can go back, Anthony. Back to your life. As the wielder of the stones, you have earned that right. You have the power to send yourself back to the living world. All you have to do is snap your fingers.”

It feels wrong. There must be a catch. "So what, I just click my heels and then I'm home?" He scoffs. "Sounds too easy."

“I assure you, there is no catch. Not this time.” Had she just read his mind?

"So I can go back…"

"...Or you can move on."

"Where is on, exactly?"

Something about the question makes her eyes sparkle. Or glint. It's either amusement or a warning. He can't get a read on this one. "I am afraid I cannot tell you that."

"But on isn't here."

"Oh no. This," she looks up into the endless black. "This is only a stop along the way."

"But I am dead, right now."

"Oh yes. Very much so."

He brushes his working hand over his chest. It feels so solid, but something is off, and the touch is distant, as if he's feeling it through many layers of clothing, despite only wearing his under armor. "So this, right now. This is what, a projection of my consciousness?"

She folds her arms behind her back, looking appraisingly at him. "Some would say that. Some would call it your soul."

He resists rolling his eyes, but only just. "Okay, sure. How did my soul get here, then?"

"When one wields the stones, their life force becomes inextricably intertwined with the life force of the stones. When a wielder of the stones dies, and their soul departs from their body, if they are chosen, the stones depart with them, and that individual's soul is transported to the Infinity Realm along with the stones."

"That's..." He stops, unsure what he was even going to say.

"...Quite a rare gift," she concludes. "The stones do not choose indiscriminately. Very few are ever deemed... worthy... to carry them."

And something about the way she puts it, it's enough to spur him on, enough to make him want to go home. Just as he is about to say this though, something gives him pause. She is frowning at him now, and the grief must show on his face. “What about— We lost …” he can't bear to finish the thought.

She regards him a bit sadly now, he thinks. Her face remains unchanged but something in the eyes is softer, almost sympathetic. “I am sorry, Anthony. But once a life has been given in exchange for the soul stone, it cannot be restored. Your friend is at peace now, if that is any consolation.”
It should be. It really should be. He nods, but his head hangs low.

"Your friend gave her life to save the universe. You cannot get her back, but you can honor her memory."

He thinks about Nat then. Her kind smile, her stalwart companionship, her ineffable charm. Her eagerness to fix past mistakes. *I've got red in my ledger. Now I need to wipe it out.* Nat did it first. Now it's his turn.

"You know," he begins with a new fervor. It makes him feel almost like his old self again. The woman is smirking conspiratorially now. She knows where this is going. "I was never good at just … sitting back and relaxing. It's just not …." he twirls his good hand through the air. "…me."

"It seems you've made your choice then," she says.

"You know, I think I have. Although, first thing's first." His hand comes up to feel the side of his face, which is still burnt nearly beyond recognition. He concentrates very hard and wills his arm to work, clenches his fist and the time stone glows bright. He holds out his arm, and the power of the stone wraps around his wrist, projecting a strange circular interface with symbols he cannot interpret. He feels it coursing through him, but he knows somehow that here, in this plane, it cannot hurt him.

"Be careful with that," she warns. "The time stone requires a gentle hand to wield correctly."

He smirks. "Yeah, thanks. I think I got it."

She looks … amused? He turns his wrist gingerly. When he has finished he feels a renewed vigor and sure enough, reaching up to his face, the skin is smooth and whole. "All finished?" she asks, still smiling cryptically and definitely amused now. He nods. "Before you go, I must warn you that some time has passed since your death. It may take some convincing before your friends believe your story. So give this message to Steven Strange: this is the unlikely resolution to the one in 14 million."

"Right, okay secret code, got it. One more thing: what happens to the stones when I go back?"

"If you wish, they can remain here in the infinity realm, never to be used again."

He nods. Yeah. Good plan. That leaves him with just one more question. "Who are you?"

She smiles. "I am called the Ancient One. Goodbye, Tony Stark. We will meet again, but not for a very long time. Live well."

And with that, she is gone. Not wanting to stay another moment in that strange lifeless plane alone, he snaps his fingers…

* * *

… And drops unceremoniously into the common area of the Avengers Compound. He knows that's where he is without looking, because that had been where he'd told the stones to take him. He gasps involuntarily, violently - his entire body clenches up around it. The oxygen burns his lungs and makes his eyes water, and faced with the challenge of breathing again, he realizes it hadn’t been necessary in the infinity realm. Something pulls painfully in his heaving chest, scraping against his ribs, and he looks down to see the arc reactor, the first iteration of it that he had created…

... Shit.

Maybe he *had* been a bit heavy-handed with the time stone. He tries desperately to school his
breaths, coughing and gasping and gagging at the sudden change in atmosphere, remembering how to breathe with the reactor scraping against his ribcage, and just trying to ease his body through the shock of being alive again. Everything hurts. He is cold and shivers roll over him like waves. Despite being fully clothed (and he *is* fully clothed, in the same jeans and long-sleeved t-shirt he'd been wearing when this had all started), he feels naked somehow. His heart stutters painfully in his chest, the ever-present reminder of life. The biggest indication of this, though, is the fact that he feels like he's dying. Shit. Inter-dimensional travel is a bitch.

When he can wrap his mind around something other than the shock and the pain, he realizes then that his eyes have been closed. When he opens them, he discovers that he has an audience. Clint, Sam, Rhodey, Scott, and oh god, *Steve*.

And they're all pointing weapons at him.

Steve is visibly shaking. “Who…the hell…are you,” he asks in that low, dangerous voice that he reserves only for his vilest enemies. Being on the other side of that voice is not an easy thing. Tony, who is still on hands and knees, gasping for each painful breath he can get, closes his eyes and tilts his head to the ceiling so he doesn't have to see the look on Steve's face.

The left side of his face begins to heat up, and looking over, he sees the tell-tale beginnings of sparks, which swirl together at a blinding speed until Steven Strange steps out of the portal. Tony realizes belatedly, looking up at him from his position on the floor, that he's never seen Steven Strange look surprised before. The wizard, doctor, whatever he is, has the infuriating ability to remain calm in any circumstance. But right now he looks unmistakably rattled.

“What is this?” Strange asks, looking from Tony to the partial assembly of Avengers.

“Strange,” Tony greets with a nod, still out of breath.

“Who the hell are you?”

Tony sighs, and it sends a sharp pang through his chest. He massages the arc reactor carefully, sitting back on his knees to regain some semblance of dignity. He puts all of his efforts into staying upright and focused when he speaks. “What, can’t a guy come back from the dead and drop in on some old friends now and then?” he wheezes. And the look on Strange’s face. If only Tony had a camera. “You know, I met a friend of yours. Interesting woman. Yellow robes, no hair. Like… if Lex Luthor did Tai Chi.”

Strange’s eyes are wide. “The Ancient One. How…”

“She gave me a message for you: This is the unlikely resolution to the one in 14 million. I’m assuming you get what that means.”

Strange looks completely and utterly shocked. Tony gives a smug half-smile. “This … wasn’t supposed to be possible. We thought … When you snapped and the stones disappeared, I theorized that it was possible your soul had been transported to another plane along with the stones, but, I never saw this coming.”

“Yeah, well, what can I say? I’ve never been good at predictability.”

“You used the stones to get back here?”

“Yep.” He smiles winningly and Strange looks about ready to have a stroke. For a long moment he says nothing, and then he seems to come to some acceptance of the situation.
“Welcome back, Stark,” he says softly. It’s the least hostile Strange has ever been to him, and he senses the undercurrent of respect there. Tony nods back, still shivering, but thinking probably no one will judge, considering the circumstances.

“Wait … hold on…” Rhodey’s voice, raw and desperate. Tony thinks about Afghanistan, about collapsing into Rhodey's strong arms and feeling safe, and hearing his friend now makes him ache for that.

Strange turns to his friends. “You can drop your weapons now.” He turns back to Tony. “Iron Man has returned,” he says softly, reverently.

There is a loud clatter and a few muttered curses and invocations and Tony thinks a few of them may have actually dropped their weapons. And then Steve is there, moving slowly toward him. He’s grown a beard again and Tony wonders how much time has actually passed. “Tony?” Steve asks, his voice wrecked. He drops to his knees in front of Tony, eyes darting up and down his body desperately, as if trying to take in every last inch of him at once.

“Hey, Steve,” Tony says quietly, relief pouring out of the words. Steve puts a hand up and covers his mouth and Tony watches as silent tears begin to run down his face and into his beard. Tony puts a hand on his arm, trying not to wince as he does it, and that’s all it takes for Steve to pull him into a bone-crushing hug that leaves him devoid of oxygen once again. But for once, he can’t be bothered to care, because Steve is solid and real and warm and the shivers that were wracking his body are finally dissipating as he soaks in that warmth. He relaxes into and soon Steve is shaking and Tony realizes his friend is crying silently. His sobs jolt through both of them and Tony strengthens his grip. “Hey, Steve, it’s okay. I’m okay,” he says softly.

Then there’s another thump and Rhodey hits the floor on his knees next to them, staring at Tony like he’s never seen anything so incredible in his life. Steve relinquishes his grip and sits back to allow Rhodey some space. He grips Tony’s arms tight. “You bastard,” he says, and the tears are streaming down his face as well. Then he contradicts himself and pulls Tony into his chest and hugs him tight. Tony’s always been able to speak Rhodey’s language. “It’s good to see you too, Rhodey,” he says, voice muffled in Rhodey’s chest. He pats his friend’s arm affectionately. It’s unclear how long they sit there, but Clint and Scott and Sam have edged in and are looking at him with pure awe. And eventually he realizes if he doesn’t get up now, he may just stay in the arms of his friends forever.

“Hey, help me up, will ya?” he requests. Steve and Rhodey each grab an arm and haul him to his feet. But his equilibrium is still off from inter-dimensional travel and he nearly topples over onto the tiled floor. Steve and Rhodey hold him tight.

“Easy, Tony,” Rhodey says, and Steve grips his arm more securely.

“Sorry,” Tony says a little dazedly as they help him onto a stool at the kitchen counter. “Rough trip.” He leans heavily on the counter, and Clint puts an arm on his shoulder and squeezes.

“Hey, Iron Man,” Clint says softly, with the same tone of wonder Steve and Rhodey had used.

Tony grabs the hand on his shoulder. “Hey, Clint.” And then it hits him again, that gnawing pain in his chest, and the light grasp becomes a desperate hold. “Clint, I tried to get her. I tried to get her, I tried. But I couldn’t- there was no way.”

“Hey, hey, no it’s okay,” Clint says gently. His grip is like steel but his voice is suddenly shaky and paper-thin. “You’re here. You’re here.”

Tony nods, schooling his expression, and his eyes flit across the counter to Sam. He nods at him.
“Hey, Wilson,” he says, and he finally realizes how rough his voice sounds, but he is genuinely happy to see Sam, because all the old grudges died long ago. Sam extends his arm across the counter and grasps Tony’s hand tightly. “It’s good to have you back, man,” he says, and Tony can see that he means it. It’s written all over his face.

And then there’s Scott. Last in the receiving line, he grabs Tony’s hand and shakes it just a bit too long but as gently as possible, and Tony feels strangely fond of him and his eternal optimism in that moment. “Hey, man, holy shit, I can’t believe you’re back. This is ... wow.”

And soon they’re all in the common room, nursing beers partly because it’s the only drink in the refrigerator and partly because if there’s one time when alcohol is necessary, it’s when your fallen teammate comes back from the dead. They sit in shocked silence for a long time, taking long, slow sips. Tony’s beer is half-finished when Rhodey finally speaks. “So how- I mean, how is any of this possible?”

Tony nods and takes a deep fortifying breath. “To be honest I’m not completely sure.” He glances over at Strange, who is looking at him intently, as if he can divine the answers if his gaze is sharp enough. Tony does wonder. “The Ancient One, she told me that as the wielder of the stones, I had earned the right to choose my own path. So I did.” He shrugs.

And it sounds crazy, but Strange is actually nodding along. “The stones give the wielder the power to bend time, space, and the very fabric of reality. I believe that after your death the stones transported you to a different plane of existence and the Ancient One, also a being of immense power in this life and now in the next, became aware of your presence and sought you out because she wanted you to know what your options were.”

Tony nods, devoid of any words to possibly respond and Rhodey’s arm around his shoulders tightens. He is acutely aware of the warmth radiating from Steve, who sits next to him on the couch, not touching but as close as is socially acceptable, or maybe even a little closer than that. He feels pulled into that warmth and it’s a conscious fight not to lean into him. God, he’s missed Steve. Missed him for years.

“Okay, I got one more question,” Sam says then. “No disrespect, but last time I saw you, you looked a lot older.”

And Tony actually laughs at that. At the utter honesty of the words and at the absurdity of it all. The laugh comes from deep down and bubbles out, but he stops it short because it borders on hysteria and he’s afraid he may not be able to stop it if he lets it keep going.

They are all looking at him carefully now as if they’ve all just noticed that his hair is indeed several shades darker and longer and probably sticking out in all directions, sweaty and unkempt like it used to be when he took off the Iron Man helmet. And his face probably bears far fewer lines. He hasn’t looked in the mirror yet, but he can remember well enough what he looked like at that age. It’s Strange who speaks next. “You used the time stone, didn’t you? To reverse the effects of wielding the gauntlet, to heal yourself. It’s a bit finicky. You were probably too heavy-handed with it.”

“That’s-” he begins, a bit defensive. And then, well. “Yeah. I may have accidentally de-aged myself by about 15 years.” He taps at his chest, nails pinging off of the glass of the reactor casing. “This was the first arc reactor that I built, so that should make me-”

“Thirty-five,” Steve finishes, because of course he knows. “You’re thirty-five,” he shakes his head in disbelief and lets out a short bark of laughter. Steve is technically 106, but his body is only about 37 if you don’t count the years suspended in ice. So that means Tony is younger than him now, any way you slice it.
“You bastard,” Rhodey says with a grin. “You save the universe, *die*, resurrect yourself, and come back lookin’ better than all of us.”

“To be *fair*, it was completely by accident. I only meant to heal the damage to my body,” Tony says honestly.

“Yeah sure,” someone says. It’s Clint, and he’s smiling. “I would’ve done the same thing, brother,” he assures him.

“Okay, hold on. So this means you’re the youngest one here, right? I mean, that’s crazy. This is totally crazy,” Scott says.

“Yep. Totally crazy,” Rhodey says, lifting his beer. Everyone else follows suit, and they all toast and drink the rest of their beers in silence.

They do not plan or strategize that night about what to do now that one of them is back from the dead. They fill Tony in on what has happened in the three months that have passed since his death, and Tony is truly shocked that that much time has gone by when his time in the infinity realm had felt like mere minutes. He must look a bit overwhelmed, because Rhodey pats his back comfortingly, and Steve edges in a bit closer.

He finds out the world has mourned his death, and memorials to Iron Man can be found on just about every street corner. He finds out that Steve has taken over leading the Avengers again, or what’s left of them, but the world is still reeling even three months after everyone returned, so no major threats have arisen so far that have required the team’s intervention. Peter took his death hard, and Happy checks up on him regularly, Rhodey assures him. Pepper had bounced back after Blipping and stepped up as the CEO of Stark Industries after his death. She lead the company through a tumultuous time and helped honor his memory in any way she could. The Guardians left Earth after the funeral. Bruce went off the radar for awhile but lately he’s been checking in every so often, and he visits New Asgard semi-regularly.

By the time they cover everything, Tony is about ready to drop. Strange conjures up a portal and leaves them with parting words that are not unkind. Clint and Scott and Rhodey retire to their rooms, Clint wrapping an arm around his shoulders and squeezing tightly, Rhodey giving him another bone-crushing hug, and Scott patting his shoulder. And then there’s just Steve, because everyone had known that they needed this, that Steve would take care of Tony. Steve, who’s been looking at him so desperately all night that it physically hurts. Steve, who looks so warm and so much like home that Tony wants to just fall into his arms.

He’s too tired to hide his emotions anymore, and when Steve looks at him with concern it nearly breaks him. “Are you okay, Tony? I mean-” He seems to realize how ridiculous the question sounds. "-you know what I mean.”

Tony looks up at him, eyes swimming dangerously, throat constricting painfully. “Yeah, I'm okay,” he rasps. "I just - I'm so tired, Steve." He hates how miserable and desperate it sounds, but the exhaustion and the shock of everything have broken down his walls.

Steve’s eyes go momentarily wide, but then he nods, because this is something he can help with. He places a hand gently against Tony’s back and leads him down the hallway of the wing where his and Steve’s rooms were. “Come on. Your old room is still here. We haven’t touched a thing.” And true to form, Steve is right. The room looks exactly the same, and it takes Tony by surprise how comforting that is. Steve fidgets in the doorway as Tony steps into the room. “Tony…If you need anything, I’m right across the hall,” he says quietly, and Tony knows he means it.

“Goodnight.”

* * *

That night, Tony dreams. There is a bright flash and then there is pain and the devastation on the faces of his friends as darkness creeps in around him, and then something is grabbing at him, pulling him, shaking him, and he bolts upright, chest tight and straining for air. He raises his hand to call the suit to defend himself against the nameless attacker, but the suit does not come, and now someone is calling his name.

“Tony! Tony, easy, come on, wake up.” A gentle hand on his outstretched arm. And oh. Steve. It comes flooding back to him and he dips his head low, lets his arm drop heavily, taking carefully constrained breaths now, forcing himself to shove down the panic that threatens to bubble up and overtake him. A warm hand rests on his shoulder, and it feels like the only thing in that moment that’s grounding him to the physical plane. Steve continues speaking gentle words to him, putting him right again, and after a few seconds of deep breathing, he finally opens his eyes.

“Shit,” he says miserably.

The hand tightens on his shoulder briefly before moving up to cup the side of his neck. “I know. I know, I’m sorry, Tony.” Steve sounds well and truly miserable on his behalf. "Are you alright? What do you need?"

“I don’t know, Steve,” he answers miserably. “Tonight-“ he glances at the clock. 4 a.m. “Last night,” he amends, “was a lot. I’m just - I’m feeling a bit like I’m hanging by a thread here. I can’t stop thinking about…everything. I mean it was all ... It was yesterday. But it wasn't, it was three months ago and, god, I just can’t...”

The hand slides down his arm. Steve brings his other hand up, and now he’s gripping Tony by the arms, framing him tightly and securely as if Tony will slip away again if he doesn’t. “I know, Tony,” he says a bit desperately. "I know."

And with that, Steve pulls him into another hug. It pulls a sigh out of Tony, and he feels safe. Then it occurs to him. “Hey, I’m sorry if I woke you earlier,” he says into Steve’s shoulder. Steve clears his throat, and Tony feels it reverberate through his chest.

“You didn’t. I was…I came in here to check on you,” Steve says, and that’s when Tony sees the chair pulled up beside the bed that hadn’t been there when he’d gone to sleep.

“Oh.” It’s not the answer he was expecting.

“I’m sorry. I just … I had to make sure you were still here. It still doesn’t hardly feel real.”

“I’m right here, Steve. I’m okay,” he says, hoping the words are solid and strong. Glad that he's pressed into Steve's shoulder so Steve can't see how uncertain he feels.

Steve nods and pulls away, avoiding Tony’s eyes. “I should let you get some sleep. I’m sure you’re exhausted. I’ll just-“ he makes to get off the bed, but Tony grabs his wrist lightly.

“Or, you could stay. If you want,” he says, and he winces a little because he knows his face is probably desperate.

Steve freezes in place. “You … Is that what you want?” He sounds almost ... hopeful. But Tony
doesn't let himself go there.

Tony shrugs, suddenly extremely interested in a loose thread on the comforter. “I mean, that chair doesn’t look too comfortable. You might as well just … stay here.”

He risks a glance up now, and the look on Steve’s face threatens to make him emotional all over again. “Okay,” Steve says, and as his voice breaks, Tony marvels at the way he packs so much emotion into that one word. Wordlessly, he scoots over and allows enough room for Steve to crawl in next to him. They lie facing one another until Tony bridges the gap hesitantly and lets his forehead fall against Steve’s chest. He squeezes his eyes shut tight, because it's too warm, too real, and it shouldn't be. Steve shouldn't be here; it's not how they do things. But Steve wraps an arm around Tony and brings his hand to cup the back of his head, and then rests his chin on top of Tony’s head, and it's the best Tony's felt in a long time, despite everything. Somehow, it just feels right, the way they fit together. Eventually, Tony falls asleep, lulled by the gentle rise and fall of Steve’s chest.

* * *

Tony wakes up, still enveloped in Steve’s arms, surrounded by his smell and his warmth. He feels something shift above him and realizes Steve’s already awake. But he hasn't left. That has to mean something. “Hey, Steve,” he murmurs into his friend’s chest, nuzzling just a bit as he says it.

Steve grips him tighter. “Hey, Tony.” The words rumble comfortingly in his chest and Tony represses a sigh of contentment.

They lie there for awhile, just breathing, and Tony must nod off again because he's suddenly woken again when Steve says, “How are you feeling?”

That’s a complicated question. “Better than I’ve felt in 15 years, but … also terrible,” he mutters, and Steve's chest jumps as he chuckles in response.

“You think you could eat something?”

"Yeah, but…I think I’ll shower first. Has it been a month since I’ve done that or just 15 years?”

Steve laughs again, nuzzling his nose affectionately into Tony’s hair just a little bit, and something inside of Tony that he'd thought was broken beyond repair begins to slowly knit back together.

When Tony enters the bathroom, he finally gets a look at himself. He looks like death warmed over, but he looks unmistakably younger, stronger, less broken at least on the outside. It’s a bit unnerving, almost akin to seeing his younger self during the time heist, but even more so because he's in this body; it's his body. It makes his skin crawl thinking about it too much, so he resolves not to dwell on it. Feeling the reactor in his chest again and not just attached to his clothing is an even more off-putting sensation. When he showers, he notices with a shiver that all of the old battle scars are gone. It’s bizarre, having the memory but not the mark of them.

When he finally makes his way into the kitchen, Steve is cooking and Rhodey and Clint are sitting at the table talking quietly. Conversation stops when he walks in and Rhodey gives him a look like he's lost and then found him all over again. He gets up and makes his way over to Tony. “How ya doin’, Tony?” he asks quietly.

“’I’m alright, honeybear-oof!” Rhodey pulls him into another tight hug that squeezes the air from his lungs, but he squeezes right back and pats Rhodey gently. “Rhodey, I’m alright. I’m fine, okay?”

Rhodey steps back, keeping his arms on Tony's shoulders, and his eyes are suspiciously watery. “I
know. I know. I just … I still can’t believe you’re back.” He shakes Tony gently to punctuate the thought. It’s a sentiment that Tony understands. He notices Rhody looking him up and down with a distant, nostalgic look in his eyes and raises his eyebrows. Rhody shakes himself free of his daze. "Sorry, I just … I can’t get over it. You look so young. It's like …"

"Like old times?" Tony finishes.

Rhodey smiles. "Yeah. Somethin' like that."

Eventually, Sam and Scott join them and Sam thumps him on the back as he passes.

When they’ve just about finished eating breakfast, there’s a loud commotion at the front gate. Clint checks the video feed and laughs. “You got a visitor, Tony,” he says.

Shortly after, Happy bursts through the door. He’s out of breath, wide-eyed, and staring Tony down like he’s looking at a ghost. “Hey, Hap,” Tony says a bit urgently but also probably a bit too casually for someone who's been dead for a month. A multitude of expressions flash across Happy’s face, and Tony would find it amusing if his concern weren’t growing the longer Happy stays silent.

“You, you, you, how?” Happy finally stutters.

Tony shrugs. “Second chances,” he says, and then opens his arms. Happy grips him so hard he winces, and then his feet are off the ground. Tony Stark does not like being picked up, in fact as a general rule he avoids it at all costs. But his relief at seeing Happy is enough for him to let it slide. Chuckles are floating around the room, and when Happy sets him down, Tony’s actually grinning along with everyone else.

“Tony, this- Rhody texted me, said to get over here. I thought- I don’t know what I thought. Have you been alive this whole time? I swear to god, if you’ve been faking your death this entire time, I will personally-"

“Woah, woah Hap, easy there buddy. You're kinda giving me whiplash with the emotional back-and-forth there. I was not faking my death, I swear.” Tony holds up his hands innocently. "I actually died. I just-" he shrugs again. “Came back.”

The look on Happy’s face is nothing short of comical. “Okay, that’s— people don’t just come back, that’s not how that works, I mean otherwise everyone would do that-"

“Well, it’s not that simple-” Tony starts, and now they’re both talking over one another.

“-crazy, I don’t even understand-”

“-I had a choice-“

“-and you look different. You look-“

“-okay I can actually explain that one-“

“-Holy shit, is that the arc reactor?“

And eventually, Rhody breaks up the conversation, barely concealing his amusement, and they make Happy sit down so Tony can tell him the story. When he’s finished, there are silent tears running down Happy’s face, and Happy stands and bear-hugs him again.

They sit for awhile until something pained flits across Happy’s face, and “The kid,” he says. “Shit, I
gotta tell the kid, Tony. Oh my god, he's - you have no idea. Oh my god.”

“Yeah, yeah, get the kid over here, go get him,” Tony says, slightly dazed.

And then Happy is out the door, moving more quickly than Tony’s seen him move in a long time.

When Happy has left, Steve crosses his arms and takes on his captain voice that Tony has teased him about so many times. “Until we figure out how to handle this, I think the fewer people that know, the better. Friends and family only.”

Tony nods firmly. “Agreed.”

“You think we’ll have to rope Fury in on this?” asks Sam, ever the pragmatist. “We may need S.H.I.E.L.D’s help to make up a cover story good enough to explain to the world why Tony Stark is suddenly alive again.”

Steve nods. “Eventually, yes. But I think we all deserve a few days of rest before the shit hits the fan.” Tony smirks up at Steve, and Steve returns it. He still finds Steve Rogers cursing to be endlessly amusing. A lot has changed since they last called one another friends, he thinks wretchedly.

“We need to track down Bruce. I’ll send a message to New Asgard, see if he’s there. Then, maybe he has a way to get in contact with Thor,” Clint says.

“Where is Thor?” Tony asks. “Off world?”

“He hitched a ride to space with the space idiots after your funeral. We haven’t heard from him since then,” says Clint.

“The Guardians of the Galaxy gave Thor a lift?” Tony snorts. “I would’ve loved to have seen that.”

“Oh, so that's what they’re called. I've been calling them the space idiots.”

“You know, that blue lady was scary as hell, but she looked sad at your funeral,” Scott says.

Tony doesn’t bother hiding his surprise. “Nebula? Huh. Wouldn’t’ve pegged her as the mourning type.” He thinks of Nebula with a wry smile. He also thinks he might nearly miss her.

Scott and Clint and Sam leave later, and Rhodey reluctantly heads out soon after for a senate committee meeting. Steve is the only one who doesn’t have a job or a family, and he lives at the compound, so he stays. And if he thinks about it, he’d never leave Tony anyway. Not now. Not again.

They talk - really talk - and even laugh a bit, and it reminds Steve of the old days. It's effortless, like it used to be. He marvels at how full of life Tony looks again, with 15 years of pain and stress and near-death experiences off his back. This is Tony as only Rhodey and Pepper and Happy had known him. This was Tony before Steve was even out of the ice. A man thrust into an impossible situation, forced to endure unspeakable pain and suffering, and he came out of it a better person. He went into that cave in Afghanistan as the Merchant of Death, and left as Iron Man. Steve feels like he understands a little bit better who Tony was back then, just by virtue of getting to observe him.

Steve suspects it must feel strange to Tony, being able to remember every battle and every horror but back in a body that has seen almost none of them. He thinks of Tony during the years following the Decimation, running the company in Pepper’s place when she vanished, helping Steve and Nat and Sam here and there with small missions, even staying in the compound with them on occasion to
mourn the ones that they lost. Tony had looked tired all the time, then, and his eyes had been devoid of the steely, confident glint that Steve had come to appreciate. Losing the fight had broken him in many ways. Had broken all of them. And now, he bears more of the youthful glow that Steve remembers from when they first met. It was like getting the old Tony back in more ways than one.

“You okay, Steve?” Tony is asking him, and he realizes he’s been staring at Tony as he reads from a StarkPad, trying to catch up on everything that he’s missed.

Steve gives a genuine smile. “Yeah. I’m good, Tony.”

“Okay...” Tony doesn’t look convinced, but he lets it go. "Hey, did you know they built a monument for me in South Korea? It’s a 20-foot memorial statue of Iron Man. Bizarre,” he says with a shiver.

“Must be odd, watching the world mourn for you,” Steve says.

“I’m sure you can relate a little bit.”

Steve thinks about his first year out of the ice. About walking into a record store to buy some music in an attempt to catch up with popular culture and seeing a vintage Captain America poster for sale there. About visiting a museum dedicated to his life, built by people he’d never even met. “Yeah, I think I can. A little bit.” They both share a smile. It’s gentle and real and Steve feels stupidly happy in that moment as he sits next to Tony on the couch. He opens up the drawing pad in his hands and pulls the pencil from behind his ear, and sketches Tony quietly for the next hour.

Eventually, Tony requests to see it, and when Steve shows him, he looks a little shocked. "Damn, I forgot how talented you were.” He looks at Steve now, and his gaze is enrapturing. "You got any more?" he asks, and Steve flips through the sketchbook and shows him all the drawings he’s done in the past three months. Clint shooting his bow. Sam sitting at the breakfast table clutching a cup of coffee in both hands like it's a lifeline. Bucky in the field mid-run. And several of Tony.

One of him after the wormhole (god, that feels like a lifetime ago), looking up (and Tony remembers it, he'd been looking at Steve), smiling, slightly dazed but triumphant. One of him in a suit (and he remembers that suit, he'd owned that exact suit, damn Steve was good) standing behind a podium, leaning forward confidently, addressing a crowd (he can't pinpoint that exact memory because there had been so many of them, but he wonders if Steve knows, he bets Steve knows). One of him standing in the conference room of the compound, wearing glasses, gesturing with a cup of coffee in his hand, going over how they'll get the stones back.

And then the one Steve has just drawn, of him sitting on the couch, head in one hand, elbow propped up against the armrest, looking for all the world like nothing bad has ever happened to him. There is care in these drawings. Tony can feel it. He closes the book and runs his hand over the front reverently before handing it back to Steve. Their eyes meet and Steve gives him a watery smile. "Guess I kinda missed ya,” he says.

Later, there is a loud commotion and somewhere down the hall a door bursts open. Someone is running, fast. Happy yells something out that sounds like "easy, Pete," but he can’t be sure. And there is Peter Parker, pale and panting and wide-eyed, staring right at them.

The pad drops from Tony’s hand and he stands up slowly. “Kid,” he says quietly.

Peter walks toward him hesitantly. “Tony? Is this real?” He sounds doubtful, desperate, and his eyes are red-rimmed and shiny, and it's obvious he's been crying. His hair is unruly and his clothes are a rumpled, hastily donned afterthought. He'd probably been asleep when Happy had called him this morning, the poor kid.
Tony takes a few more steps toward Peter. “Yeah, kid, it’s real. I’m here.”

And that’s all it takes for Peter to bridge the rest of the gap and cling to Tony like his life depends on it. Tony speaks softly to the kid, and Peter just hugs Tony and cries. Tony closes his eyes as he holds the kid, and a tear slips down his face as he stands there. Eventually, he pulls away and wipes inconspicuously at his face. “You alright? I know this is a lot, but I’m back. It’s really me. I promise.”

Peter nods. “You were dead, though, I saw you die. How is that possible?” His voice is rough from crying, and the tears are staining his face now.

Tony does something unexpected, then. He shrugs down the sleeve of his shirt and uses it to wipe at Peter’s face. “It’s- complicated,” he says as he does this. And then, he does his best to explain it to Peter.

When the story is finished, Peter is left looking at Tony like he hung the moon. He takes a deep breath and seems to pull himself together now. “Wow, so, like inter-dimensional travel? That’s crazy. And you chose to come back. That’s -“ Peter is tearing up again, and he leaves the thought unfinished.

Tony puts a hand on his shoulder. “Well, yeah I did. I mean, who else would make you cool toys and help you with your homework?” Peter laughs, wiping away an errant tear.

“No, hey, come on. I’m sure you’re hungry. I’m starving. How about a cheeseburger. You like cheeseburgers? You’re seventeen, of course you do. I make a pretty decent cheeseburger, and that’s me being modest. Also ... I’m pretty sure that’s the only thing we have in the fridge right now.” Tony is now moving into the kitchen and Peter is watching him in awe.

Steve steps up quietly to stand next to Peter. “You hangin’ in there?” he asks.

Peter nods. “Yeah. I just- I can’t believe he’s here. Making lunch,” he says with a small laugh.

Steve chuckles. “Me neither. But how could we expect anything less?”

“Alright, kid don’t leave me hangin in here,” Tony calls from the kitchen. He’s already found the burger patties and is rummaging through the spice cabinet for the correct seasonings. “I’m gonna need condiments, napkins, placemats, everything on the table. Make it look nice, ‘cuz I’m about to make you the best damn cheeseburger you’ve ever had. And no silverware, it is un-American to eat a burger with a fork and knife.”

And, true to form, Tony correctly estimated his abilities. They’re damn good cheeseburgers. They pass the meal with good conversation. Tony asks for updates on Peter’s life, and Peter tells him about a girl. Tony gets excited and wants full details, and Peter blushes but tells him happily anyway, and Tony says he likes the sound of this MJ, that she sounds ‘refreshingly irreverent and rebellious in a John Hughes sort of way’. Happy brags on Peter’s accomplishments in school and a few of his hijinks as a “friendly neighborhood spider”. Steve and Peter have a good-natured argument about whether the food is better in Brooklyn or Queens, and Peter concedes that while Brooklyn may have the best pizza, Queens has the best Chinese food. "If you've never tried the bao, you're missing out, man". Tony watches the whole exchange with sparkling eyes. For many reasons, it’s one of the best meals Steve has had in a long time.

Later on in the evening, Peter announces that he should go home before his Aunt May “kills him”. Tony stands to walk him and Happy out, and when he comes back inside, his eyes are misty.
“He’s a good kid, Tony. You’re good with him,” Steve says.

Tony huffs out a laugh but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. They are far away and haunted. “I thought I wouldn’t ever see him again, Steve. After the snap, or the blip, whatever they’re calling it now. It - nearly tore me apart, the guilt and the loss. God, we lost so many. And then, I got him back, and he had to watch me die. I wanted - there was so much I wanted to say to him, and I couldn’t. I didn’t have enough left in me.” He spreads his arms out. “And now, here I am. As insane as it is, I’m alive, and I’ve been given a second chance to make things right. And I can’t waste it. I won’t.” Steve wonders what Tony said to Peter when he left. Looking at Tony now, he knows they were carefully chosen words.

“I know you won't, Tony,” Steve says quietly.

Tony looks at him intensely now. “I'm sorry for the mistakes I made with you, Steve. I've regretted them every day. God, I'm so sorry," his voice wavers a bit but he pushes on because once Tony commits to something, he's all in. "I don't want us to fight anymore. Not ... like that. We spent too many years fighting, and it tore the Avengers apart. Never again. From now on, we communicate, no matter how difficult it is. No secrets, no lies. If one of us has a problem with the other, we talk it out.”

Steve nods and holds out a hand. “Deal.” Tony grasps it firmly, and the handshake turns into a tight hug. "I'm sorry too, Tony," he whispers into Tony's ear. "You're not the only one who made mistakes. I've made so many. And not a day goes by that I don't think about them and regret what it did to our friendship.”

"It's okay, Steve," Tony whispers back. "I forgive you." And the relief of hearing that drains all the tension from Steve's body. He melts into the hug and rests his chin on Tony's shoulder. Tony chuckles when Steve’s beard tickles his cheek. He pats Steve on the back before backing up a step to look at Steve appraisingly.

“You know, I like the beard,” he says thoughtfully. “Always did. It's a good look on you, Rogers.”

Steve smiles, and the beard can't hide the way his cheeks go red. “Thanks.”

* * *

They sit on the couch and talk for awhile, first about inane things, and then about the more serious matter of how they will introduce Tony Stark back into the world, how they will explain his “new look”, and how they will piece together the leftover wreckage of the Avengers team.

Steve loses track of how long they sit there, but when Tony gets up to stretch his legs and nearly topples over, Steve decides it’s time for bed.

“I'm okay. I'm fine,” Tony protests, but some of his credibility is lost due to the fact that Steve is currently the only thing holding him upright.

“You need sleep, Tony,” Steve insists gently. He is pressed gently against Tony, and the fact that Tony makes no move to push away lets Steve know how true his own words are.

“And what about you?” Tony asks, dodging the remark.

“I … don’t think I’ll be able to.”

“Well, me neither.”

“Well, I guess we’re at an impasse, then.”
Tony huffs frustratedly, but Steve doesn’t relinquish his grip. “What if - for the sake of our own peace of mind, we bunk together again,” he suggests lightly.

Tony’s eyes narrow, and then go wide. His mouth opens but no sound comes out. He clears his throat and finds his voice but it sounds ... odd. “That’s … not a bad idea, actually. Very practical,” he says carefully.

“Yes, very practical.”

“Alright, then.”

“Okay.”

* * *

They lay side by side in Tony’s bed, and Steve’s shoulder is warm where it brushes against Tony’s. The casts a pale glow on Tony’s face, and it’s comforting that Steve can see him easily even in the darkness. “Rhodey slept on my floor the first night after I came back from Afghanistan,” Tony says quietly. “He said I’d been gone so long, it was the only way to assure himself that I wouldn’t disappear again.”

“I’m familiar with the sentiment,” Steve says. And after a pause, “Thanks for not making me sleep on the floor, though.”

Tony chuckles. “I was injured. He wanted me to have the bed to myself. I swear I’m not that much of an asshole.”

“I didn’t think you were. You’re only a little bit of an asshole.” Steve draws a genuine laugh out of Tony at that.

“Hey Steve?” Tony says after a beat.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for staying with me today.” His voice is low and his words are starting to slur together in his exhaustion.

“Of course. I won't leave you, Tony. Not again. You’re not the only one who was given a second chance with this.”

“I meant what I said about us. I don’t want to fight anymore. Our friendship means too much to me …”

 “… I know. I meant it too. No more fighting.”

“Good.”

“… Although, I am older now in every respect, so I think my thoughts on matters should be regarded more highly-“

“Grandpa Steve, you are truly an asshole,” Tony laughs.

“Takes one to know one, kid.”

“Oh look at that, we’re finally agreeing on something.”
“Yep. We’re both assholes.”

Eventually, the conversation devolves further into sporadic chuckling. After awhile, Tony’s breaths even out and he falls asleep. Steve lies awake for a little while longer, watching the rise and fall of his chest, resisting the urge to place his hand there, just to feel it. Then, Steve falls asleep too.

If Steve shoots awake some time in the night with the ghost of Tony’s name on his lips and the smell of burnt flesh in his nostrils, and Tony wraps an arm around Steve’s waist until he falls back asleep, they don’t speak of it in the morning. And if Tony wakes up later gasping for air and clawing at his chest until Steve places a hand over the arc reactor and speaks softly and calmly into his ear as he falls back asleep, they don’t mention that either.
Chapter 2

In the morning, Nick Fury is leaning against the kitchen countertop with a cappuccino in hand, and judging by the two full plates set out on the bar in front of him, the motherfucker made breakfast for them.

“Good morning,” he says with a wry smile. “How was the honeymoon suite?” he asks, drawing a pinched look out of Steve and making Tony bristle.

“Fury, you’re still a son of a bitch. It’s comforting to know that some things haven’t changed,” Tony says breezily.

“Stark. A little birdie told me the hereafter didn’t suit you too well.”

“Was this little birdie named Sam Wilson?”

Fury sets down the cappuccino and motions for Tony and Steve to sit in front of the plates. “Don’t be mad at Wilson. He and Barton needed my help to get a secure message to Banner. He didn’t say a thing.”

“You know it’s rude to look over someone’s shoulder while they’re texting,” Tony says.

And Fury must be going soft, because he actually chuckles. “You know, it’s not often I mourn a man’s passing and he comes back from the grave to insult me.”

Tony waves a hand dismissively. “Ah, that’s not the only reason I came back, don’t flatter yourself.”

“Why did you come back, Stark? You bought the farm; you could’ve just … settled down.”

“I had unfinished business,” Tony says, unblinking.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back.” And Tony does blink at that. “The world is in chaos; it needs Iron Man. I’ve been dealing with skirmishes breaking out all over Europe for the past week and a half. Latveria’s entire government is crumbling. It’s been a nightmare. And … I missed you, Stark.” And with that, Fury walks out. “I’ll put a team together to work on possible cover stories for you. Just let me know when you’re ready to officially rejoin the land of the living,” he calls over his shoulder.

When Fury’s coattails finally whisk around the corner, Tony shakes his head. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he says. He looks down at the plate thoughtfully. “You think he poisoned the food?” He turns to look at Steve, who stares at him blankly with a giant mouthful. “Well, then. I guess we’ll find out.”

* * *

Two weeks after Tony’s funeral, Steve visited Peter Parker. He hadn’t been sure how the kid would react to his presence, considering his and Tony’s mercurial relationship in the past. They'd put things aside for the fight against Thanos. Tony had been angry at first, but working together during those five years had cushioned the distance between them a bit so it wasn't so hard and painful. But, left with a sense of responsibility and desperate to see a piece of Tony again, he’d knocked on the door to Peter Parker’s apartment.

After Peter’s aunt got over the initial shock of Captain America showing up at her door, she’d offered him tea and cookies and told him that Peter would be back from his afternoon patrol shortly.
“It was so nice of you to come,” she had said. “Peter’s been … quiet since Mr. Stark’s death. He’s taking it really hard, and I just feel … useless. I don’t know how to deal with this. His parents died when he was really young; he doesn’t really remember them. But Mr. Stark … was like a father to Peter in a lot of ways. He really invested in Peter, and when he died, I think Peter felt like he lost another parent.”

As Steve listened, a single tear crept down into his beard, unbeknownst to May. He cried a lot lately. Steve had spoken what he hoped were comforting words to May, and they shared a few more thoughts on Tony and Peter until Peter arrived home.

Peter froze in the doorway when he saw Steve. “Captain America?” he said softly. The expression on his face was nothing short of wretched, and Steve knew he was thinking of the last time he saw Steve, which was also the last time he ever saw Tony.

“Hi, Peter,” Steve said softly.

They ended up in Peter’s room, and Steve noted with faint amusement all of the elements of “nerdy” pop culture around the room. “Hey, uh, Captain America … sir … it’s cool that you’re here, but do you mind if I ask why … you’re here?” Peter asked in a small voice.

“Please, call me Steve.” Peter’s eyes widened. “Do you mind if I sit?”

That seemed to snap Peter out of his daze. “Oh, no, uh, go ahead.” He motioned to the rolling desk chair, the only seating area in his room.

Steve sat and rolled the chair towards the bed where Peter sat. “I came to check in. See how you were doing.”

“How I’m … doing?” Peter frowned. “Why?”

Steve tried not to wince at the blunt honesty. “Because I like you. Because Tony was my friend. And because like it or not, you’re an Avenger now.”

Peter looked down at his hands. “I thought the Avengers broke up.”

Unbidden, a sigh pulled itself out of Steve. “They did. But that doesn’t mean the world doesn’t still need us. And once an Avenger, always an Avenger.”

Peter nodded and finally looked up at Steve. “I miss him, Steve.”

“I know, kid. I know. Me too. Every day.”

“I just … he always believed in me, you know? He’s the only person besides May who ever has. And then he … I just keep thinking, what if I had done more, what if-“

Steve had interrupted the downward spiral then. “You can’t think like that. You did everything you could, Peter. Tony chose to do what he did, and we need to honor his sacrifice by continuing to protect this planet. The Avengers are disbanded, but there is a small team who’s still operating under the original mission. Scott Lang, Clint Barton, Sam Wilson, Bucky Barnes, and me. I’d love to have you on the team, but only if that’s what you want.”

Peter didn’t hesitate. “Yeah. You can count on me.”

* * *

* * *
Bruce arrives around midday - in his own jet of course, because he can no longer fit in normal planes. He places a large green hand carefully on Tony’s shoulder and says his name in wonder. Tony grins up at him. “Hey, big guy.”

And Bruce, being Bruce. The first question he asks is why Tony looks so different. Tony shrugs and tells him he made a few modifications with the time stone. Bruce nods knowingly. Steve helps walk Bruce through the story because he can tell Tony’s getting tired of telling it.

“So you met the Ancient One,” Bruce says finally.

“Yeah. Real groovy lady. Just a little bit terrifying.”

Bruce eats lunch with them and asks Tony several sensible questions that Tony has been dutifully avoiding.

“So, what are you gonna do now?”

Tony sighs. “Right now, I’m playing the waiting game. S.H.I.E.L.D, or whatever’s left of it, is coming up with a cover story for me so I can get back in the real world. After that, I guess I’ll just … continue on.”

* * *

“Damn, Cap,” Clint had said to him one night, just a week after they won, a week after all they lost. “I didn’t think that stuff affected you.”

Steve had winced and downed the rest of the whiskey. “It doesn’t. I can still feel the burn though. I guess that’s something.” And it was, but it wasn’t enough to justify this exercise in futility that he’d always practiced over the years when life got too big and too heavy. And like Sisyphus rolling the stone up the hill, he’d poured another glass.

Clint had settled in beside him then, and Steve had poured him a glass as well. Clint had taken a sip and winced. “Damn,” he said. “Good stuff.” Steve had merely shrugged. He’d never been able to tell the difference. “Who are we remembering tonight?”

“Both of them…All of them,” Steve had said.

“I wish I could say it got easier,” Clint had said.

“But it doesn’t,” Steve had finished.

“Yep. The pain gets farther away, but it never goes away. I think after awhile, some of us learn to bear it better. But. It never goes away. Of course, I’m not really one to talk when it comes to dealing with grief.” Clint had taken another sip then, but Steve still thinks the grimace was not from the burn of the drink, but from the shame. Steve had taken a sip in solidarity, because mistakes were one thing he could relate to.

“So, if it doesn’t get better, then what do we do?”

Clint had looked at him then, and Steve saw the full weight of everything held in his eyes. “We continue on anyway.”

* * *

Continuing on is a seemingly simple and straightforward directive. Steve has always been good at
taking orders. It becomes his marching order, the constant beat of a drum that echoes in his own mind. And yet, at night, when Steve keeps watch over Tony, when he occasionally gets the excuse to pull him into his arms and feel him warm and solid against his chest, he thinks, how can I ever continue on after this?

And there it is, the most devastating realization of all: Tony Stark will be his undoing.

* * *

Pepper drops by eventually, somehow both tearfully happy that Tony is alive and full of rage that it's taken her so long to find out. Tony holds her hand as they sit together on the couch, and something about it makes Steve's stomach twist painfully. They talk about personal matters, and then they talk shop. Pepper agrees to keep everything quiet until S.H.I.E.L.D can work out a cover story for Tony. Tony thanks her for everything she has done to keep the company going in his absence, and when he tells her how amazing she is, she smiles and says "I know." It's so perfectly Pepper and Steve can't help but smile.

When Pepper leaves, Tony calls Peter to check in, and Steve listens on with a growing fondness, marveling at the new feeling of warmth in his chest that seems inexplicably tied to Tony.

* * *

Tony replaces the arc reactor a few days in. Steve recalls seeing the words palladium poisoning while reading Tony's file years ago. Tony assures him that it's only lethal over a long period of time and he'll be perfectly fine as soon as he replaces it with a new reactor made from the element he'd synthesized. Luckily, since no one had dared to touch a thing in his room, the old arc reactor he'd kept there is right where he'd left it.

Steve finds Tony in his room, holding the arc reactor in his hand. His face is bathed in the eerie blue glow and he stares indecipherably at it. "You ready to do this?" Steve asks quietly, almost afraid to break the spell.

Tony jumps. "Yeah, I was just ... thinking." He sighs and rubs his free hand over his face.

"Tony, I know this can't be easy," Steve says softly, and when Tony looks up at him, shit, he looks so young, but his eyes hold a tiredness that is centuries old.

Tony shakes his head. "It's just so damn crazy. I'm an engineer, Steve. I trust science and data and things I can quantify. But this fight - this fight has upended me into a world that makes me question everything I've ever known. And I know I should be thankful for a second chance and I am, please don't get me wrong, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for that. But I'm out of my depth here. I no longer understand the world we live in. I mean, look at me, Steve. I accidentally de-aged myself by 15 years by mishandling a magic rock. That's not science. That's - something else. Something I don't know how to wrap my head around."

Steve nods. "You feel like a man out of time."

Tony stares at him oddly before finally huffing in disbelief. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"It can be ... disquieting, feeling like the world has moved on without you."

"How did you deal with it?"

Steve shrugs. "I learned as much as I could about the world around me, and I learned to accept the things I couldn't understand. Eventually, I even learned to see it as a gift, a chance at another life.
You guys helped me with that one. Knowing I had friends to help me through, that meant everything. It made me feel like I had a purpose beyond just ... being a government-subsidized weapon."

Tony winces as a pang of guilt cuts right through him. "God, Steve, I'm so sorry I ever insinuated that about you."

Steve smiles. "Tony you've already apologized for that."

"I know, I just ... god, I was such a dick, wasn't I?"

Steve laughs. "To be fair, I did walk around like I had a righteous stick up my ass back then. And I seem to recall making some unfair assumptions about you, too."

Tony hums thoughtfully. "Call it even?"

"Yeah."

* * *

The thing about Tony, Steve realized fairly early on in their working relationship, was that he just couldn't stop being a hero. His entire persona just invited it. He was a raging storm of a person, larger than life. The very lifestyle he chose to live, as both a public figure and a superhero, invited trouble. And Tony never went looking for trouble. But he never ran from it either.

Another thing Steve realized about Tony was that his instincts for self-preservation were shit. He was unruly, untamable, laughed in the face of the rules. He was the perfect foil for Steve, which was part of why Steve had resented him so much in the beginning. But, upon getting to know Tony, Steve realized that it all stemmed from a constant willingness to put his life on the line to protect others. Whether he was flying into a building about to collapse around a group of injured people, or taking the full force of a missile headed straight for Nat. Tony Stark just couldn't stop being a goddamn hero.

And then, a straightforward mission went wrong and ended with Tony unconscious in a building that was rigged to explode. And Steve, being the good team captain that he was (and purely just concerned for Tony as a fellow teammate of course) had rushed into the building and dragged Tony out with seconds to spare. As the building exploded behind them, Steve had gotten to work ripping off pieces of the suit so he could pull Tony out of it. Tony had felt so small in his arms then, as he had picked him up and placed him gently on the ground, cradling his head, afraid that he'd break him. And when he realized Tony wasn't breathing, Steve's blood had run ice cold. Wordlessly, he began chest compressions, counting them out quick and even like a marching beat.

Ages later, Nat found them, and Steve was still doing chest compressions and nothing - nothing - nothing - each beat was still nothing. Nat had placed a hand on his shoulder, and her shaky voice saying his name barely broke through the fog of panic. But still, Steve didn't stop. And finally, finally Tony's eyes had sprung open and he'd gasped loudly and suddenly Steve could see in color again. He'd placed a hand against the side of his friend's face and smiled like an idiot that day when the arc reactor blinked to life again. Tony had turned wide eyes on him then. "Hey, Cap. You miss me?" he wheezed, and Steve, overcome with relief, had dipped his head to rest it against Tony's chest. Tony had patted his back gently as he caught his breath, and said something about going for milkshakes after this.

Tony had grasped his chest involuntarily when Nat had told him back in the Quinjet that Steve had done chest compressions on him for ten whole minutes. He'd looked at Steve then, barely concealed
shock and gratitude written all over his face. "Thanks Rogers," he'd said quietly. "I owe you one."

And say what you want about Tony Stark, but he always pays up. Just a week later, a hail of missiles had rained down on an unprotected Steve, and Tony laid on top of him and just ... took it. He'd told Steve later that the suit was designed to take heavy fire power like that, but when the barrage had ended and Steve rolled him over with hands that were shaky with panic, and saw the genuine look of surprise on Tony's face that he was still alive, Steve had already known that wasn't true. Tony had saved his life that day, knowing full well he could have died; of that Steve was sure. And the cocky bastard had looked up at him then with a crooked smile and said, "We're even now."

Steve wonders now if that smile had been the start of it all.

* * *

"Bet you never thought you'd be doin' this," Tony grunts, his voice tight with discomfort as Steve's hand reaches into the empty metal cavity in his chest.

"Yeah, when you said you needed help, this is not what I had in mind," Steve says distractedly, tongue poking out between his teeth as he concentrates on not touching the wire to the side of the housing. Tony had told him to think of it like the game Operation, and Steve isn't sure if that had made it better or worse.

"Yeah, well, your fingers are longer than mine." Right at that moment, the heart monitor begins beeping wildly and Steve glances at Tony in alarm.

"It's okay, just ... get it out quick," Tony says through gritted teeth, but probably too calm for someone in the middle of a cardiac event. Caution thrown aside, Steve quickly pulls the rest of the wire and hands it to Tony, who connects the new arc reactor and shoves it unceremoniously into his chest. The monitor goes silent and Tony breathes out a sigh of relief, going limp with relief against the table. There is a sheen of sweat covering his body, and Steve's gaze lingers on his naked chest.

"Hey, my eyes are up here," Tony says when he's recovered. Steve jumps guiltily and he smirks. "It's okay, it's ... not pretty to look at." His voice is soft and there's something distant and pained in his eyes that Steve hates.

"No, Tony that's not - I've never thought that," he says quickly.

"Really. You've never thought that," Tony says flatly.

"No. I just always saw it as a part of you. It keeps you alive. And, if I'm honest, it's ... a little badass."

Tony laughs. "Badass, huh? Guess I'll take it, since I'm stuck with this for the foreseeable ... ever."

"You can't just ... do whatever you did last time you removed it?"

Tony hunches over, elbows on his knees, dangling his legs over the side of the chair he'd been lying back on. "No. I destroyed Extremis after I used it to heal myself the first time. It was too dangerous, too powerful. I stabilized it just enough for my purposes, and even then it was a risky procedure. So yeah. I'm stuck with this. But hey, it's a small price to pay. No big deal." He taps absently at the glass casing.

"Does it hurt?" Steve finds himself asking. Tony regards him strangely and he realizes it's a question he's never asked before.

After some consideration, Tony says, "It did at first, but then I learned to breathe with it. So no, it
doesn't hurt anymore." He reaches over for his shirt, and when he pulls it back on, the back of Steve's neck finally stops burning. He thinks about those words and he feels that somewhere in the space between him and Tony, those words form a nexus. *We're all just learning to breathe through the pain.*

** **

Steve's latest pain comes in the form of Tony telling him he doesn't need to keep sleeping in his bed at night. It's Tony's fourth night back and he seems to realize the slippery slope they're on, so he tells Steve that he's fine and that Steve can stop worrying because he's not going to disappear again, and that Steve would probably get a better night's sleep if he doesn't have to keep worrying about Tony. And Tony moves around in his sleep a lot and the arc reactor probably glows too bright, and every new excuse is another nail in Steve's coffin, but he smiles and nods and sleeps alone that night. And it's the worst night of sleep he's had since Tony got back.

This startling level of co-dependency is not news to Steve. He and Tony had always shared a strange bond. However, the amount that Steve needs Tony has increased tenfold since Tony returned. Sometimes, Steve still gets hit with the sense that none of it is real, and he has to engineer some excuse to touch Tony or accidentally brush up against him just to reassure himself. It's stupid, but it is what it is. Tony hasn't seemed to notice the added levels of desperation in their friendship, and Steve thinks it's probably for the best that Tony never know how much his death had truly wrecked Steve.

** **

One thing Steve had not been expecting: The Benatar landing right on the front lawn of the Avengers compound and Thor hurtling over the fence and into the common area with a flash of lightning that leaves the hair on his arms sticking straight up.

Thor lets out one of his booming laughs when he sees Tony. "Stark! Banner contacted us about your return. I had to see it for myself." He grasps Tony's forearm tightly and pats him on the back vigorously. Tony greets him with a wide smile and a chuckle, making a valiant effort to keep his knees from buckling as Thor hits him, and Steve can tell he's relieved for this kind of reunion. No tears, just celebration of life and victory. Thor has a warrior's heart, and warriors celebrate. Then at the sudden commotion on the security feeds, Thor turns to Steve. "Oh. You may want to let them in before they break something."

The Guardians of the Galaxy look incredibly out of place standing in the middle of the kitchen. Nebula is the first to approach Tony, and something in Tony's face goes soft when he sees her. She stands close to him and sizes him up carefully. "I thought you were dead," she says simply, her voice cold and mechanical in a way that Steve still can't get over.

It doesn't seem to phase Tony, though. He smiles and shrugs. "I was, but it was boring, so ... I came back."

She grabs him by the arms them, quickly and tightly. "I am glad," she says. Tony jumps at the sudden contact but does not pull away even as she scrutinizes him more thoroughly. He seems accustomed to this kind of treatment from her. "You are different," she says, matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I'm a little younger, long story-"

"No," she says. "Your energy readings. They are different."

"What? That's not-" He stops when she grasps his chin in her hand abruptly and turns his head to examine him.
"I have never seen readings like these in a human before," she says, squinting at him. "They are ... very complex. Almost like-" She stops, and then fixes him with a look of chilling foreboding. "Where have you been?"

* * *

Out of everyone they've told the story to, Thor and the Guardians are the least surprised. Steve suspects that hanging around with an anthropomorphic tree and a talking raccoon has a desensitizing effect after awhile. Thor places a hand on Tony's shoulder. "I admire your courage, Stark. Valhalla is a paradise full of untold peace and happiness, but you chose to return to this planet to help it rebuild. Truly a selfless decision." Tony looks a bit uncomfortable but smiles politely at the praise.

"Okay, my problem with this: You could've done anything with those stones, man! And you just chose to heal a war wound?" Quill, an idiot.

Rocket smacks the back of his head, which is a feat because he has to reach up very high to do it. "Quill, you jackass. He died saving the universe. Show some freakin' respect."

"Hey, all I'm sayin' is it was a missed opportunity. Man, if that was me, I would'a made myself super buff with awesome hair."

"But this man is already buff and has amazing hair," Drax says.

"Okay, not that this isn't fun-" Tony begins.

Drax isn't finished. "He is not as large and physically foreboding as Thor or this other sad man with the beard, but he is sturdy and compact and symmetrical. His body is very aesthetically pleasing."

To Steve's utter delight, Tony is actually blushing. There are a few drawn-out moments of silence when Drax is done speaking. "I feel ... objectified," Tony says a bit forlornly, and Steve has to bite back a smile.

"If you idiots are done with this stupid conversation, we have more important matters to discuss," Nebula says.

"Right, starting with the apparent issue with my energy signals. What exactly-"

"Your energy readings are nearly identical to the Infinity Stones." And then it's like all the air is sucked out of the room. Tony's face is unreadable, but if Steve's own feelings are anything to go by, he is probably putting every spare bit of energy into not panicking.

"What does that mean?" asks the woman with big eyes and antennas. Mantis, some back corner of his mind supplies. Steve remembers her from the funeral, although everything about that day is hazy, clouded by grief.

"It means using the stones ... altered me in some way," Tony answers, scrubbing a hand over his face roughly.

The memory hits Steve then. "Didn't the Ancient One tell you your soul was with the stones when you used them? Is it possible that ... when you came back, they didn't fully separate from you?" he says.

Tony digests his words thoughtfully. "That's ... very possible. In fact, it seems like the most likely explanation." He turns to Nebula. "Can you see anything else? Is it ... dangerous?"
"It does not seem dangerous in the immediate sense, although I cannot extrapolate from the readings," Nebula says, looking Tony up and down. "The signals themselves are much weaker than the stones, but the essence of the energy signals is an exact match. Have you felt different since you returned?"

Tony shrugs. "Aside from feeling 15 years younger, no. I feel fine."

"Whatever power you possess lays dormant inside of you, then."

"Okay, that's oddly premonitory. Are you saying it's possible for these things to become active inside of me?"

"My scanners do not measure hypotheticals," she says, and Tony actually rolls his eyes.

"I think that we should not rule that out," Thor says. "It would be wise to be examined by someone who knows what they're doing. My mother was able to detect the Aether inside of Jane. Surely someone else has a similar ability here in Midgard." He looks at Mantis. "What about you, bug woman? Can your abilities help us?"

Mantis shakes her head, antennae swinging. "I am afraid not. My abilities are empathic. All I can do is read his emotions."

"You can read emotions?" Tony asks incredulously.

"Yes, by touching someone. I can also alter another's emotions at will."

"That's ... unsettling."

Mantis beams at him. "Thank you," she says happily, clearly not understanding the word. It only serves to throw Tony further off track, and Steve is struck by this odd role reversal. Tony is usually the one who can so skillfully draw exasperation and discomfort out of others. It would be very entertaining if the current topic of conversation wasn't giving Steve gruesome flashbacks to Tony's death. His fists clench painfully at his side. Never again, he vows.

"What about Strange?" Steve says instead.

"Hey, now there's an idea," Rocket says, crossing his arms.

"I am Groot," Groot agrees.

"I agree with Rabbit and Tree," Thor says. "We shall contact the wizard tomorrow. But for now, I would like a good night's sleep. That ship," he points outside, "has terrible bunks."

"Hey, what'd you have to go insulting my ship for?" Rocket says.

"Uh," Quill scoffs, "I think you mean my ship."

"Ugh! If you two argue about whose ship it is again I will rip out your tongues!" Nebula screams.

It shocks Steve, but Tony only smiles. "She's my favorite," he says to Steve.

* * *

Another thing Steve had never thought he would have to do ever: show a talking tree and raccoon to their room for the night. The tree is engrossed in some kind of old video game that beeps and whirrs loudly and does not acknowledge Steve's presence, but the raccoon turns to look up at him. "Thanks,
Rogers. Hey, I wouldn't worry too much about your friend. He's a fighter. He'll be alright." Oddly enough, the words have a calming effect on Steve. Probably because they're such a departure from Rocket's typical acerbic attitude. With a polite nod, Steve leaves.

Tony is showing Nebula to a room now, and once again, Steve is taken aback by the odd camaraderie they have developed. Nebula burns with rage and violence, and even her voice makes Steve's palms tingle with apprehension. But when she speaks to Tony, a bit of the acid drops out of her tone, and the malicious glint that is always in her eyes dulls by a degree. And Steve has not missed that she has not removed the piece of Tony's armor from her mechanical arm. They exchange a few quick words, Tony giving the briefest of smiles at something she says, and then Nebula retires to her room for the night.

When everyone has gone to sleep, except Tony and Steve, they sit close together on the couch in the common room and talk.

Tony shakes his head and chuckles humorlessly. "You know, part of me still can't believe all of this."

"I know what you mean. When I first came out of the ice and saw how much the world had changed, I told Fury nothing else could surprise me after that. Was I wrong."

"Well, to be fair, there was a time when you were the most improbable thing on the planet." Steve laughs. "But now, we have literal gods and sentient trees and talking raccoons and ... weird, buff aliens with henna tattoos."

"Are they tattoos?" Steve asks absently. "I thought they were just part of his skin."

"Ah, I don't even know. Hey, what's up with the tree?"

"Groot?"

"Yeah, why does he only say 'I am Groot'?"

"It's ... his language, I think. Thor can understand it."

"Huh. I mean, linguistically, that's fascinating. He only has three words in his vocabulary, so it's basically a completely tonal language. I'm guessing it relies heavily on verbal context and morphological interpretation ... so really, it requires more work from the listener than the speaker."

Steve smiles. "I think you lost me a little bit there, but ... yeah."

They have both sunk deep into the couch now, shoulders pressed together.

"So, you and Nebula ..."

Tony huffs a light laugh. "Yeah. I think ... we're friends. Who'd'a thought."

"She seems like she hates everyone but you."

"Not everyone. She had a sister. Thanos killed her to get the soul stone. She told me about her, while we were in space. She and Quill had some kind of ... romantic thing."

"Quill and Nebula?"

"God no. Quill and the sister. Gamora."
"Oh."

Their heads are leaned against one another now. Their legs are propped up on the ottoman, kicked outward in opposite directions. Steve's left side is incredibly warm where Tony is pressed against him.

"What's gonna come out of all of this, Steve?" Tony's voice is distant now, his words slurring together slightly. "What if ... I'm a threat? I mean, otherwise they wouldn't be here, right? They protect the galaxy. What if they have to protect it from me? What if ... I don't know, what if whatever's inside me left over from the stones, what if someone could access it and use it as a weapon? What-"

"-Tony, Tony, hey," Steve interrupts softly before he can spiral any further. He places a hand on Tony's thigh in hopes that it will ground him. "Easy. We're not there yet, okay? Don't think about that right now."

"I just ... need you to promise me that if the worst happens, you'll take me out before I can hurt anyone or before someone else can use me to hurt anyone."

Steve's chest is painfully tight now. He swallows against the constricting feeling in his throat. "Tony." It's all he can say.

"Please, Steve, just ... I don't wanna hurt anybody else."

"You won't. I know you won't." Steve says it several more times as Tony grows heavier against him, his head falling onto Steve's shoulder, nuzzling into his neck. And Steve is whispering "It'll be okay. It'll be okay" over and over as Tony falls asleep, hoping he can push away all of the harm just with those words, hoping he can keep Tony alive and safe just through sheer force of will. He's seen crazier things done, after all.
"Aww well isn't that sweet." An obnoxious voice drawls, waking Steve and Tony with a start
where, embarrassingly, they'd fallen asleep against one another on the couch and apparently slept
through the night. Tony sits up suddenly before he's even fully awake and drags a clumsy hand over
his face with a mumbled curse. Steve marvels once again at the longer, darker hair, pieces of it
pushing down onto his forehead. Steve had seen pictures, but he's never seen Tony like this before.
Young and almost whole. "You two are really cute, I gotta say." The voice is Rocket's. Of course.
Tony is not in the mood. He turns an icy glare on the raccoon. "Fuck off, Build-A-Bear."
"You know for someone who once cursed out his planet's entire governing body, I thought you'd
have a better sense of humor."
Steve knows exactly which UN General Assembly meeting Rocket is talking about. It was 2011,
before the Avengers had even formed. Steve's first year out of the ice. The team used to pull the
video up on Youtube from time to time when they needed a laugh. The look on each world leader's
face had been priceless.
Tony's eyes narrow suspiciously. "You - did you Google me?" he asks incredulously, all traces of
sleep now gone from his voice.
Rocket holds up a spare StarkPad in response. It looks comically large in his small hands.
"How do you even know how to use Google?"
"You know, Earth's not the only planet with an overreaching wireless information network.
Although, I gotta say, there's a disappointing lack of pornographic content on your Google."
"Okay, I wasn't ready to hear that this early in the morning." Tony cringes, shaking off what Steve
can only assume is a terrible mental image. He stretches widely, his t-shirt stretching over his chest,
and both Rocket and Steve eye him with interest.
"So ... that thing in your chest. What's it called again?"
Tony looks over a Rocket a bit startled. "It's an arc reactor. A completely self-sustaining, clean
energy source." Rocket strokes his chin and hums thoughtfully. Tony eyes him warily. "Why are
you asking?"
Rocket shrugs. "Ah, no reason I guess. Just ... curious. One mechanic to another." And despite his
earlier irritation, Tony and Rocket begin a discussion about inter-planetary communication networks
and operating systems and programming languages on different planets. Steve watches from the
kitchen, and as Tony's eyes light up with interest, Steve muses over the grudging respect he and the
raccoon both seem to have for one another.
Afterwards, Tony walks up to him. "If that rodent steals my arc reactor in the night and I die,
promise you'll avenge me."
Steve would like to have laughed, but the memory of Tony's lifeless eyes is still too fresh.
Breakfast is a large and chaotic affair. Thor settles in with the leftover cheeseburgers, and Drax eats a dozen scrambled eggs and an entire package of bacon.

Tony looks askance at Groot when he sits down at the table. "Do you eat? Or, do you just ... use photosynthesis or something?"

"I am Groot."

"...Great."

Tony also avoids sitting anywhere near Mantis at the table, and if Tony's reaction to her powers is any indication, Steve knows why. Tony Stark doesn't do feelings. Not well, anyway. He never shies away from sharing opinions, but feelings are a grey area, and emotions are too telling for someone who was raised amongst shrewd businessmen and grew up to become one. But, Tony Stark has a heart, no matter how deeply concealed it may be, and Steve Rogers has seen it first-hand.

"You know, this place is pretty sweet," Quill is saying. "Rocket showed me that Google thing. Glad to know Earth finally got some cool tech."

Tony looks up at Quill, slightly startled. "We've had internet for decades now. When was the last time you were here?"

"1988." Quill looks at Steve. "Man, I had this big-ass poster of you in my room as a kid. My mom found it at Tower Records, bought it for me for Christmas." Quill brightens up, looking between Steve and Tony. "Hey, is that place still around? I'd love to check that out while we're here."

"They've been closed since the 2000's," Tony says tonelessly.

"Awww, damnit. You guys still have Dairy Queen though, right? Those blizzards were some good shit." Steve, relieved that he understands this reference, tells Quill that yes, they do still have a Dairy Queen.

"Hey, I went to a Stark expo once when i was a kid. He was your dad, right? We read that wiki-thing about you." Quill says then.

"I am Groot," says Groot.

"Oh, sorry, Wikipedia."

Tony's face goes from stricken to carefully schooled in a nanosecond. Steve thinks he is the only one who catches it until Nebula says knowingly, "He doesn't like to talk about his father." Steve is startled that she knows this, but Tony remains impassive.

"Oh, sorry dude. My bad. I know how you feel. I had to kill my dad a couple years ago and that really sucked."

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve thinks he sees Thor rolling his eyes. "You ... killed your dad?" Steve asks, already hating himself for asking but for some reason compelled to know more.

"Yeah, he was an evil god who wanted to take over the universe, so ... kinda had to. We weren't super close though."

"Oh, well that makes it okay, then," Tony says with extremely false sincerity.
"Hey, I'm just sayin man. I get it, okay?"

"Yeah, alright, flyboy."

"...If you're gonna call me a name, call me Star-Lord."

*[ * *]

Steve does think about Howard sometimes. It's upsetting for him, knowing that the man he knew was not the same man Tony knew. Tony had alluded to their bad relationship over the years, but he never spoke bad of Howard in front of Steve because he knew they had been friends. Howard had searched tirelessly for Steve when he first disappeared into the ice. Gradually, the recovery expeditions had grown fewer and farther between, but Howard funded the expeditions up until the day he died. Tony had told him that.

Funny enough, Peggy had been the one to tell Steve the truth about who Howard became in his later years. Peggy didn't talk about the Starks often, but when she did, her eyes shone with an odd mixture of fondness and pain. Howard and Peggy had remained friends, and Peggy and Maria had become close. Maria was a beautiful, wonderful woman who loved her son dearly. Tony had been a precocious child, but always so sweet, always so brilliant. His inventing skills outshone even Howard's, and Peggy recalled a time when she began to notice that Tony had become more of a source of competition for Howard than a source of pride. Howard's alcoholic tendencies grew as old age and bitterness had set in. He loved Maria, but he was routinely verbally abusive to Tony in Peggy's presence. She suspected also that Howard had done worse when she wasn't around, but she had never been able to confirm that.

Tony had always known her as Aunt Peggy. Peggy had been a regular part of Tony's life as he grew up. She had told Steve about how startlingly easy it had been to carry on a conversation with him, at an early age. Tony had loved his Aunt Peggy. He had also loved Steve as a young boy. Or more accurately, Captain America. When Peggy told Steve that Tony had had a Captain America poster in his room for the majority of his childhood, Steve had actually blushed. Peggy had smiled amusedly. "He wanted to be just like you Steve. A hero." Steve believed her. Tony had told him once that he'd wanted to save the world like his Aunt Peggy when he was a kid.

Then, one day, the poster came down. Peggy had asked about it on a visit to the Howard house, and Tony had merely shrugged and said 'I outgrew that kid stuff.'

"I suspect," Peggy had told Steve, "that he began to feel like he could never measure up to you in Howard's eyes." Something had ached deep in Steve's chest when she'd told him that one.

Tony and Peggy had had a special relationship. When he was young, she was a regular sounding board for his new inventions, and as he grew older, she became a trusted confidant. Tony often came to her for advice when he really needed it. Sometimes about relationships, how to handle a problem with a girl, and, as Peggy had often suspected, a boy here and there. "He never did say it, but sometimes I could tell that when he was talking about a relationship that he was talking about a boy. I don't know why he never told me," she'd said to Steve sadly. "Still hasn't. I think he confuses me with the era I was born into. I think he does the same with you, too." She had laughed then. "He should know us better than that. We're far more flexible than he gives us credit for."

Tony dropped in on Peggy regularly over the years. Once, near the end, he and Steve had gone to see her together. The look on her face when they both walked into her hospital room that day still brings a smile to Steve's face when he thinks about it. Tony had looked dashing that day, in a dark blue three-piece suit. He always dressed up for Aunt Peg. His face had shone with genuine happiness he spoke to Peggy. He was so gentle with her, so ... sweet. It had taken Steve by surprise
at first, but then seeing it, it had felt like such a natural part of Tony that had been there all along. And Steve had regretted not noticing it before.

They had both pulled chairs up to the side of her bed and talked with her for a long time. Her eyes sparkled when they told her about Avengers business. She had taken both of their hands, one in each of hers. "I am so proud of you boys," she had told them. Tony's eyes had shone bright and cheerful that day, and Steve suspected it wasn't often someone told him that.

When they had left Peggy, each receiving a big hug and a peck on the cheek, they had gone to lunch. Tony had sat hunched over and vulnerable when he'd told Steve, "She's getting up there, Steve. They told me the other week they don't know how much longer she's gonna last."

Steve had known this deep down, but hearing it out loud still hurt. "I know," he'd said. They'd shared a look over the table, somehow communing silently about what their years with Peggy had meant to both of them. Steve had been startled then at how beautiful Tony's eyes were, how much emotion they held.

After that, talk had turned happier as they traded their favorite Peggy stories. Steve could tell by Tony's face how much Peggy had meant to him, and he'd told Tony that he was glad Peggy was a part of his life. The smile Tony had given him then was so soft and real. Thinking back on it, that was the first day that Steve had seen Tony Stark's heart.

The night after Peggy's funeral, Tony had shown up at Steve's apartment with a bottle of Scotch. "I know you can't get drunk, but I thought you'd appreciate the sentiment," he'd said to Steve, his eyes wavering, as if he suddenly was regretting showing up unannounced. But Steve had been relieved to see him, and he'd opened the door silently to let Tony in. Tony hadn't said much, but he'd been there, and that mattered to Steve. When Tony left that night, he'd hugged Steve tightly. "I'm so sorry, Steve," he'd whispered quietly in Steve's ear, and the gentleness of it was so different from the Tony Stark that the rest of the world saw. It had almost been enough to break him down right then and there. Steve had waited until Tony left, and then he had cried.

That's when he had known, he thinks now. That's when he had really known.

* * *

The arc reactor glints in the midmorning sunlight as Tony shifts uncomfortably in an armchair in the common area. "Do I really have to be shirtless for this? Or did Drax put you up to this? I get the feeling he's been waiting for this moment." he says. He's reached the 'joking to mask my extreme discomfort' stage, Steve realizes. Another hint is the rapid-fire speech. Steve can tell exactly how nervous or uncomfortable Tony is on any occasion by how fast he's talking. He's familiar with the sentiment, though. His face has been a bit red ever since Strange asked Tony to remove his shirt.

"It allows for a clearer view of your chakras," Strange explains.

A look of total disgust briefly flashes across Tony's face. "My what? I swear to god Strange, if this is some kind of half-assed new-agey bullshit-" and then Strange pushes on Tony's chest with his hand, and Tony flies back against the chair, completely limp.

"Tony?!" Steve steps forward.

Thor stops him with a hand to his chest. "I've seen this before; let him work. Tony will be fine." Steve nods tentatively, his hands twitching as his fight or flight response kicks in with no one to direct it towards.
All in all, the "procedure" only lasts a few seconds. When Strange retracts his hand, Tony gasps back to life and hunches over with a hand pressed to his chest, breathing hard and looking grey. "What the hell," he wheezes. "That was like the worst acid trip ever. Strange, I hate you." When Strange stands up, Steve moves to stand next to Tony, his protective instincts surging enough for him to hear his own pulse in his ears.

"What did you see?" Nebula asks.

Strange looks around the room gravely before turning back to Tony. Tony, who now sits up straight and looks defiantly, deliberately strong, as if prepared for what Strange is about to say. "It seems you absorbed a bit of the stones' power. It's so completely mingled with your own life force that there's no way for me to extract it without killing you."

Tony's eyes narrow. "Okay, so I'm stuck with it. Is it dangerous?" Strange eyes him carefully. "Come on, Strange. Am I a threat?"

Belatedly, Strange shakes his head. "As you are, no. I don't think so at least. But, if you use that power without channeling it properly, it would most likely be deadly to both you and anyone around you, possibly further. It's difficult to tell how potent this energy would be, but even a small portion of the stones' power is formidable."

"What do you mean use it?"

Strange shrugs. "It's your power to wield now. But your body is still human, and since you have no experience with magical forces, even the slightest misstep could be disastrous."

Tony nods, slightly dazed. His gaze is miles away, and his hand rubs absentmindedly over the arc reactor again. He still hasn't gotten used to it, Steve thinks. Neither has Steve if he's honest.

"Of course, with the right training." Tony's head shoots up. "No," he says firmly. Strange raises his eyebrows, probably unaccustomed to being interrupted. "What?"

"I said no," Tony says, just as firm. "This kind of power isn't meant to be used. I'll protect it, but I won't wield it."

Something inscrutable shines in Strange's eyes as he looks at Tony. "You've changed, Stark," he says quietly.

Tony raises one shoulder in a half shrug. "Maybe you just never knew me that well."

Strange nods slowly. "Fair enough."

* * *

When Strange leaves, Tony slips away and Steve doesn't see him for awhile. Steve putters around the compound with Thor and the Guardians for awhile, but around the time that Drax asks him why Tony is called Iron Man if he is not even made of iron, Steve realizes that he needs a break, so he goes to find Tony.

Tony is outside on the grass near the front of the building, where it circles around to meet the landing pad. His eyes are closed and his face is tilted up toward the sun. He would look peaceful if not for the stiffness of his spine, the almost painful tension in his shoulder. Steve sits down next to him...
"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Tony says suddenly, quietly, almost to himself.

"Hamlet," Steve supplies needlessly.

"When Horatio saw the ghost of Hamlet's father - do you remember the story? - that's what Hamlet said to him. Horatio was a smart guy, he was a scholar. And then he found out everything he thought was true about the world was wrong."

"So, are you the ghost or Horatio in this scenario?" Steve asks, and Tony actually laughs.

"I guess I'm both."

"Are you alright, Tony? That ... procedure looked ... unpleasant."

Tony shivers slightly despite the warm afternoon and Steve fights the urge to wrap an arm around him. "Steve, it was so weird. It was like being inside a fucked-up kaleidoscope. I think I left my body." After a moment, he chuckles humorlessly. "I guess this is our life now. Wizards and space aliens."

"And don't forget you have the power of six magical rocks in your soul," Steve says evenly, hoping the absurdity of the statement will draw another laugh out of Tony, and it does.

"Yeah, apparently."

"If you ever did find a way to use that power, Tony-"

"I know, Steve, but I can't. You know that. You've seen what those stones can do. No one's meant to have that kind of power. It doesn't matter how small of an amount of it I have. I'll protect it til the day I die, but I won't use it."

Steve inclines his head so it's close to Tony's. "You know I've got your back, right?" he says softly. "We all do. Whatever happens."

Tony shivers again but nods. "Yeah, I know."

* * *

That night, something carries Steve back to Tony's room. Part of him feels guilty for invading Tony's privacy, but another, much deeper part of him feels the overwhelming need to make sure nothing bad happens to his friend ever again. In sleep, Tony looks incredibly young, and Steve wonders not for the first time what Tony had been like at this age the first time around. His thoughts wander vaguely over the topic of Tony until the pattern of his friend's steady breathing hitches and Tony struggles briefly before bolting upright. Tony is breathing heavily and Steve approaches him slowly. "Tony-" he says, touching his friend's shoulder.

Tony grabs Steve's arm and flips him onto the bed, hand raised for an attack. Shit. Tony had always told Steve not to wake him up. Now Steve knows why. "Tony, hey, hey, it's me," Steve says gently, keeping his voice purposefully calm. He winces at the vice-like grip Tony still has around his wrist.

Tony blinks, and then recognition lights up his face. He launches himself off of Steve and over to the far corner of the bed, as far away as he can get. "Steve? Shit. I'm sorry, fuck, Steve, I didn't-, I'm so-" Tony is spiraling. Steve shushes him gently.
"Tony, it's okay. It's okay." Tony sits back on the bed and puts his face in his hands, still breathing heavily. Steve, very cautiously, reaches out to touch him again. When Tony doesn't react, Steve rubs his back gently. Tony heaves a sigh and Steve keeps his hand moving in slow, soothing circles until he feels some of the tension ease out of the tight muscles there. "You alright?" he asks eventually.

Tony looks up at him, and Steve thinks he sees a bit of shame there. It makes him feel brittle, seeing his friend like this. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just ... nightmare," he mumbles. His eyes wander listlessly around the room until they land on Steve's chair. "Were you sitting in here again?"

Steve looks away. "Yeah. I'm sorry, I just ... after today, I wanted to-"

"It's okay," Tony says quickly. Steve nods. The room is quiet. He can hear Tony's heartbeat, finally returning to normal. The arc reactor glows under his t-shirt, casting everything in a pale blue light. It's strangely beautiful. Steve realizes belatedly that his hand is still rubbing along Tony's back, and slowly, Tony leans into him until he is pressed against Steve's side. He clears his throat, and Steve waits while he collects himself enough to say whatever he is going to say. "You ... wanna stay?" he asks quietly.

Steve doesn't hesitate. "Yeah." Slowly, he lies down and after a beat Tony lies down next to him.

They lie facing one another and when their eyes meet, it nearly breaks Steve. The pain is palpable there, and Steve hates it. He is powerless to stop the tear that slides down his face into his beard. Tony tracks the path of the tear and takes a shaky breath. "Steve," he says brokenly, and it's all he needs to say. Steve reaches out and Tony wraps his arms around him. They lie there, intertwined, just breathing.

"We'll be okay," Tony whispers into Steve's chest. Steve wonders if he really believes that.

A month after Peggy's death, Tony quit drinking. No one said anything about the noticeable lack of a glass in his hand at the end of a hard mission or the conspicuous absence of the mini bar in his workshop. It was an implicit agreement among the team. Let the man be. Let him live. With difficulty, Steve followed this unspoken rule. He was a private man himself, after all. But, there was of course the problem of Steve's protective instincts towards the team. Or, as Tony called it, his hero complex. So, of course, he checked up on Tony semi-regularly.

Steve had liked to visit Tony's workshop and sketch on occasion, so it wasn't out of the ordinary for him to make the trek down there. The problem, though, was that Tony Stark was an exceedingly perceptive individual and Steve had never mastered the art of subtlety. So, it wasn't five minutes into Steve's new plan of checking up on Tony when Tony had put down his soldering iron and turned to Steve. "Alright, Rogers, I can hear you thinking from here. Wanna share with the class?" Steve had winced at Tony's use of his last name, which at that point in their relationship, was only used when they were being professional or when Tony was irritated at Steve.

Steve had felt raw and exposed, like he was stepping into the line of fire. "I just thought I'd come visit," he'd said, hoping it sounded innocent enough.

Tony's eyes had narrowed in suspicion. "You usually come down here to draw, but you haven't picked up that sketchbook since you got here." When had Tony even had the chance to observe him? "Why are you really here?"

Steve had looked away, and Tony, probably feeling a bit harsh, had amended, "Just be straight with me, Steve."
"I came to see how you were doing. It's been a rough month."

Tony had sighed then and pulled up a stool at the workbench where Steve was sitting. "I know the team knows I quit drinking. And I know everyone's too polite or too private to say anything or whatever, and that's fine. But, god, please don't walk on eggshells around me. It makes me look obtuse, and I hate looking obtuse."

"You're not obtuse, Tony. If anything, you're the opposite. You're-"

"-Acute?" Tony smirked humorlessly.

Steve had laughed at the bad joke, because it was him and Tony and that was their way. "I was gonna say -just going through a rough time and we don't wanna make it worse by bothering you about it. But yeah, you're very acute."

"Gee, Rogers, you sure know how to sweet talk a fella."

"I'm serious Tony. Don't mistake our silence for indifference. If we don't ask, it's because we don't think you wanna tell."

Tony had nodded then, and his eyes had looked far away when he said, "Howard drank a lot. When I was a kid. I'll just say alcohol didn't mix well with his personality. And Aunt Peg, I loved her so much, but she always made me think of them. Howard and my mom. When she died, I did a lot of thinking and probably a bit too much self-medicating, and I realized that even though I probably wasn't an alcoholic, I was definitely gonna get there sooner or later if I didn't slow down. So ... I stopped." He'd shrugged, as if opening up to Steve more than he ever had before was no big deal.

"That took a lot of guts, Tony," Steve had said sincerely, not bothering to conceal the respect he felt, even though he knew Tony hated emotional displays. Tony's eyes were down in his lap and he made no move to respond, so Steve had continued. "How are you doing?"

Tony had nodded, still not looking at Steve. "I'm okay."

And that was the thing about Tony Stark. He was always okay. Always deflecting. But Steve had let it slide when Tony had asked about how he was coping with Peggy's death and the look in his eyes had been so sincere. It had reminded Steve of the night Tony had hugged him.

* * *

In the morning, Nebula catches Steve and Tony leaving Tony's room together. Both of them freeze on the spot, but she merely nods silently. Then time restarts and they nod back, and Nebula continues down the hall.

Later, she asks Tony to spar in the gym, and when Tony gets over the momentary shock, he agrees.

He begins to regret it when they step into the ring. Her cold, black eyes are predatory as she slowly circles him in a fight stance. "Okay, just remember, you are a cybernetically enhanced assassin. I am a glorified mechanic with a heart condition. So go easy."

Nebula's eyes narrow. "You are a powerful warrior. I have seen you in battle. I will go exactly as hard as I want."

Well, today is as good a day to die as any. Tony shrugs, and shakes out his arms.
When they begin, Tony is intensely grateful for the 15 years he's gotten back. It means he actually gets in a few good blows before Nebula pins him. "That was good. But you can do better," she says, helping him up.

"Okay, why are we doing this? I am no match for you without the suit on. If you really want some sparring practice, I could put it on and we could go a few rounds. Or you could just ask Steve."

"We are here because your life is falling apart around you, and when my life is falling apart around me, I like to hit things. I did not ask you to put on the suit because fighting unhindered is much more satisfying. And ... i asked you to spar because out of everyone here I hate you the least." She looks away as she says the last part. It's ... almost sweet.

Admittedly, Nebula is his favorite cybernetically enhanced assassin. He may have a bit of a soft spot for her. "Thanks? I think. Let's do this."

* * *

It's been awhile since Steve had any reason to ponder the laws of physics. But give him a beautiful day and an afternoon cup of tea and suddenly he's waxing scientific. Lately, his thoughts revolve a lot around Tony, and as he flexes his wrist, he thinks of the painful grip Tony had used on it last night to flip Steve over the bed and underneath him. Something about it had been odd, but under the circumstances of last night, it had eluded him. Now, Steve thinks about physics, and about the sheer probability of flipping someone of his size and weight with just the flick of a wrist ...

* * *

"You're tapping out too early. Fight harder!"

"Don't know if you've noticed, Nikita, but I'm fighting pretty hard," Tony grunts. His face is red from exertion and his sweat-drenched hair is clinging to his forehead. Nebula is ... dismayingly less fatigued.

She grits her teeth. "You can do better. Fight!"

Tony does.

* * *

It had been such a quick thing. One sharp movement from Tony and the next thing Steve knew, Tony was on top of him. His hand was a vice around Steve's wrist. It hurt.

* * *

They are really sparring now. And Tony is more or less keeping up. He's pushing at 100% capacity, giving everything to the fight. Because say what you want about Tony Stark, but he never does anything by halves.

* * *

Steve had been standing at full height. And Tony had been lying on the bed, completely horizontal. It was a terrible angle, really. It afforded no purchase. The cup of tea trembles lightly in his hand. He sets it down before he spills it.

* * *
Tony might imagine the glimmer of respect in those dark eyes. He might not. Either way, he's in this fight now. So, when she pins him again, he doesn't yield. And something inside him whispers *you can do more.*

* * *

He sets the cup down a bit too hard. A bit of tea splashes onto the table.

And Tony had only used one hand ...

* * *

"Come on, Stark-" And that's all it takes. He pushes up on her chest with the hand that's not pinned to the floor. Then he watches as if from outside his body as she goes airborne and lands a few feet away from him. *Shit.*

* * *

Steve feels sick when it finally dawns on him. He feels stupid. He pushes up from the table abruptly to stand on shaky legs...

* * *

Nebula picks herself up, but Tony remains on the ground. His heart is beating too fast, and there is a rushing sound in his ears and shit-shit-shit. "What the hell," he mutters. Nebula's gaze is piercing.

* * *

"Tony, try to calm down a little."

Tony is incredulous. "Are you *serious* right now, Steve?" Then they begin talking over one another.

"-I'm just trying to-"

"-This is so fucked up I can't even-"

"-You think I'm not freaking out about this too-"

Their words get louder and louder until Mantis is standing between them, touching both of their arms, and then something cool and calm whooshes up Steve's spine all the way out to his fingertips and he feels like he can breathe again. Tony takes a deep breath and though his eyes are wide, Steve can tell he feels the same relief. He raises an index finger at Mantis. "I will allow that just this once," he says, before backing up to sit down on the couch in the common room. "This is bad," he says eventually, much more calm.

"*How* is this bad? You've got superpowers dude. Who doesn't want that?"

Tony's eyes narrow at Quill and he opens his mouth presumably to say something scathing when Thor interrupts. "That much power in the body of a mortal is not good. It is also a beacon for forces of evil that would wish to misuse the power of the stones."

"Not to mention I have no idea how to control it," Tony says.

Nebula nods. "We tried several more times to activate it. It comes and goes," she affirms.

"So what does this mean for us?" Rocket asks.
Thor shrugs. "We wait."

* * *

After the Decimation, Eastern Europe had nearly crumbled. Governments rose and fell in a matter of days. Latveria had taken the brunt of it. A small band of freedom fighters had risen up to overthrow a corrupt government, only to get forced back again. But this wasn't before the freedom fighters gained a following in neighboring countries. Nat and Steve and Tony had been called to break up a rather large skirmish on the northern border with Hungary. It had been bloody and cruel and the Avengers were there to facilitate peace, not to fight. Steve had empathized with the freedom fighters. The Latverian government was known for its corruption, its refusal to cooperate with UN-sanctioned peace talks, and its misappropriation of emergency aid funds. Tony, ever the businessman, had not trusted anyone in the situation. "Both sides are dirty, Steve. We're not gonna get a win here. At best, we'll resurrect the stalemate, but this won't end. It never does."

And Tony is right, of course. The freedom fighters have advanced energy-harnessing weapons. Repurposed Chitauri tech. Steve had seen it before, but never quite on that scale. It was unnerving. Then, the negotiations had gone to shit, and suddenly everyone was diving for cover amid a thick flurry of energy blasts and bullets. Tony and Nat had rushed to get the civilians out of the line of fire, while Steve had attempted to put down the skirmish. What had ultimately ended the fight, however, was Tony hitting the ground. He'd dove in front of an energy canon to protect a child, Nat had told them later. The blast had nearly melted his suit. Steve still remembers the searing pain of touching the metal and flipping the manual release to pull Tony out. Burns covered his arms and legs and a wound in his abdomen was seeping blood at an alarming rate from where the metal of the suit had been forced inward suddenly and punctured his skin.

Both sides of the fight had scattered after that. No one wanted to be there to be on the receiving end of retaliation for a fallen Avenger. The quinjet was fast, but it wasn't make-it-back-to-New-York-before-Tony-bleeds-out fast, so they'd ended up at what remained of a small S.H.I.E.L.D operations base in Prague with one medical officer and two field agents. Tony had remained unconscious for the entire flight, and he didn't wake up until they'd started dressing the wound. He'd woken up with a start, trying to fight the unfamiliar hands touching him, but Steve had grabbed his arm gently and explained to him calmly what had happened. Tony's eyes were glassy and distant, but he'd nodded and let the medic finish treating the wound without protest.

Later, when it was over, Steve had found himself alone with Nat. The way she had looked at him then, under the dim lights of that nearly lifeless place, it was as if she'd known. "Steve-" she'd said, and when he'd turned toward her, the look on his face must've given him away, because she'd just shaken her head. "Never mind." And that was that. His chest hurts now, thinking about what if he'd just told her. What if they'd actually discussed why he never let her set him up with anyone. But now, thinking back, that must've been the day she realized it. Seeing him there, holding Tony's hand and the achingly soft and gentle lilt to his voice as he'd spoken to him. And she must've known that he wasn't ready to talk about it. God, Nat, we didn't deserve you. Losing Nat had been like losing an extension of himself.

That night, the barest of noises had woken him up. Nat and Tony. Tony's breathing had been a little pained, a little off. Nat was whispering to him soothingly. Steve had laid perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe so he could hear.

"Hey, Boss, you hangin' in there?" Nat had used to call Tony 'Boss' very occasionally. It was an inside joke of theirs from earlier dealings that Steve knew next to nothing about except that it happened during the palladium poisoning incident. Nat had described Tony from that time as
That night, Tony had shifted on the bed and grunted painfully. Nat had fussed and Steve assumed she was getting Tony to lie still. "I'm fine ... I don't suppose you'd shoot me now and put me out of my misery."

Nat had snorted. "No. Steve would never forgive me for that one. And ... I like you too much."

"My, how things have changed," Tony had said, voice a little weak but unwavering.

"I always liked you, you know. Even back then. Even when you were ... barely tolerable. It was just something about you. Potential, I think." Steve could picture the crooked smile she'd probably given him then.

"You were the only one who saw it then," Tony had said.

"Well, I'm smarter than most people."

Tony had laughed. "Yeah you are. And I was just that much of an asshole."

"That too." Tony had laughed again, but it had quickly turned into a pained groan. "Hey, come on Tony. Lay down," Nat had said.

"Sorry, I just - I have trouble..."

"I know," she'd said. Tony was a wild, unruly force of nature. He didn't convalesce well. "But if you don't lie down, I will choke you unconscious."

Another chuckle from Tony. Weaker now, more tired. "I know you will." And then, maybe it was the drugs or the exhaustion, but Tony had said. "I'm glad you're here, with us. I'm glad you stayed."

Nat had been silent for a moment, and Steve knew she had grabbed Tony's hand, just knew because that's how she was lately. Softer and stronger all at once. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else." Tony had sighed then, and she'd whispered, "Get some sleep, Tony." For once, Tony had listened. Nat had sat with him for a long time after that, even after Steve had fallen asleep again.

Chapter End Notes

Hi thanks for reading! Let me know what you think. I'm gonna really start delving into the action in the next chapter, so I'd love any feedback if you have it :). Also, bonus points if you've read any comics and know who comes from Latveria.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Back again :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor's idea of waiting to see what happens turns out to be a whole lot of eating and playing video games and drinking beer and not much else. He visits New Asgard occasionally, but his visits there are brief, and Steve sees in the stiff set of Thor's shoulders when he returns from those visits that that place holds many painful memories for him. But all in all, the man really has adapted to Earth culture well, Steve thinks. The particular video game that Thor enjoys - and that Groot will occasionally join him in - involves lots of guns and killing, and Steve wonders if he hasn't gotten enough of that already in his thousands (or is it millions?) of years that he's been alive, tearing up the cosmos for a father heaven-bent on realm domination. Then, Steve thinks about drawing, and about how he still draws pictures of the Howling Commandos and of Peggy and Bucky even though it hurts, and he thinks maybe he understands just a little bit.

Bucky is equal parts pain and happiness for Steve. He's Steve's one direct link to the past that he has left (if you don't count Tony, who Steve had first known as 'Howard's son' before he'd even known him as himself). Bucky has been on a mission with Sam and Clint, and Steve misses him when he thinks too much about it. Steve wonders about what will happen when Bucky returns from that mission, when he finally makes the pilgrimage to the compound that every other Avenger has made. The king was dead; long live the king. Steve suspects that Tony holds no ill will towards Bucky now, not since time has put so much distance between their terrible fight, not since greater pain has overshadowed it, not since Steve and Tony had proverbially kissed and made up, hugged it out.

If he's honest, some back, half-crazed corner of his minds suspects Tony and Bucky might even get along. They had more in common than they realized. Both had been confident young men, reckless and so super-nova bright that they sent others around them reeling with their indomitable spirit. And both had been brought low, and risen from the ashes of their past mistakes, becoming something new entirely.

Yes, Steve could write a Greek tragedy about both of their pasts. And yet, they were both still smug bastards. Yeah, Steve thinks, they'd get along swell.

* * *

Tony's strength comes and goes, which he seems to find equal parts frustrating and unnerving. The kitchen trashcan is littered with the shattered remains of coffee mugs that he has broken just by gripping them too tight, and there have been more than a few sparring incidents with Nebula and Steve that have resulted in bruises and sprains and a heavy dose of unfounded guilt on Tony's part.

For now, Tony's only ability seems to be added, uncontrollable spurts of strength, although it keeps Steve up some nights wondering if there is more, hidden just beneath his skin, itching to claw its way to the surface and twist itself into new, terrifying forms. Nebula had told him, when Tony was out of earshot, that something had flashed in Tony's eyes that day in the gym when he had hit her. Something that she could not quantify, but that spoke of the power that runs deep inside of him.
Tony handles superpowers with the same light irritation that one might handle a minor inconvenience, like getting stuck in traffic or getting called in for jury duty. Everyone else seems either in awe of this or plainly accepting of the fact that this is just how Tony Stark is about things. But Steve, who has learned to read Tony's finer points, knows that Tony is the type who treats things lightly, because if he doesn't, they'll destroy him. Every layer of pomp and bluster is a line of defense. Tony Stark is his own sanctum sanctorum, surrounded on all sides by impenetrable walls.

And still, no word from S.H.I.E.L.D.

"I could hold a press conference right damn now and come up with my own cover story," Tony mutters on several occasions, brought to the brink by boredom, and when Happy is there, he reminds Tony "how well that went last time," which usually seems effective in shutting Tony up. But if Steve is going stir-crazy at this point, he knows Tony must be damn-near ready to implode.

The only reprieve for them comes from sparring or from impromptu visits from the team. Scott Lang, once Steve gets used to him, is a surprisingly welcome distraction. He glows with eternal optimism and his eyes sparkle with the enthusiasm of someone far younger. That, and he has a few good stories from his days as a burglar. Quill especially takes a liking to him, and the two of them seem to talk about 80s pop culture frequently, even indulging in a stirring rendition of a song Tony tells him is called "Don't Stop Me Now" by "the greatest band to ever rock the earth", according to Lang.

Rocket proves to be very competent in the realm of technology and enjoys poking around in Tony's lab while Tony works. The two trade insults often, but there is a grudging undercurrent of respect there that Steve finds amusing. Nebula and Tony have taken to sparring in the mornings, and if Steve wakes early enough, he can find them sitting quietly at the breakfast table together after a workout, sipping coffee, watching the sun break over the horizon. Steve still cannot get a read on Drax and Mantis, although the two of them seem to spend a lot of time together. Both of them make Steve and Tony uncomfortable, Mantis for her emotionally invasive abilities and Drax for his tendency to say exactly what is on his mind at any given moment, regardless of how inappropriate it is. Drax is also prone to admiring his and Tony's physiques, which makes even Tony blush, and for that reason only, Steve tolerates it.

The most surprising development from their current living situation, however, comes one evening at dinner, when Groot says "I am Groot" and Tony, without missing a beat, says "Yeah, sure" and passes him the salt from across the table.

All conversation stops and Tony does not realize what has happened until eight pairs of eyes are staring him down intently. Then, his eyes go wide and he looks at Groot, and then around the table, and then at Groot again. It would be comical if Steve's brain didn't currently feel like it was about to turn inside out. "Uh, did you?...You didn't happen to just be speaking English by any chance..." Tony says.

"I am Groot."

And Tony must hear it this time and realize. "Oh, shit," he says, vaguely stupefied.

Rocket breaks the silence that has built up in the room. "I was wondering when one 'a you guys would catch on."

Tony blinks at him. "What?"

"Groot's language. It's easy to pick up if you're open-minded enough."

"I am Groot," Groot agrees.
Tony squints at him. "Huh. Well, shit." And then he shrugs and keeps eating, and conversation goes on as if nothing has happened.

* * *

Steve hardly leaves Tony's side nowadays, and if anything it's embarrassing, but Steve can't find it in him to actually care anymore. He has, at least, mostly stopped checking on Tony in the middle of the night, and Tony's nightmares seem to have eased up. And although it physically hurts Steve to think he won't be able to hold Tony in his arms anymore, he is glad that his friend seems to be adjusting.

The arc reactor has been the most difficult thing for Tony to get used to. He forgets about it sometimes, mostly when he has just woken up. One memorable night, Steve and Tony had fallen asleep in the common room watching a movie after everyone else had gone to bed. Steve had woken up pleasantly warm, slumped against the arm of the couch, with Tony's head pillowed on his stomach. He had shifted slowly, so carefully, to avoid waking Tony up, but at the barest movement, his friend had shot up like a bullet, tumbling off the couch, clawing at his chest. The only sound in stillness of that late hour had been his ragged breathing, but it had filled the room in such a terrible way that Steve thought he might suffocate from it. The reactor had shone through Tony's pale, clenched fingers, casting strange shadows on his face, but even in the dark, Steve could make out the utterly lost and terrified look in his eyes. And Steve had known, looking at him, that he wasn't really there right then. He was thousands of miles away, and Steve had felt that distance like a personal loss.

Worried that he would rip out the reactor in his panic, Steve had thrown caution to the wind and kneeled on the floor in front of him, grabbing his hands to still them. "Tony, hey, come on," he had murmured, for lack of anything better to say. But it had seemed to do the trick, because Tony finally looked at him, eyes confused but also alight with recognition, and his hands stopped trying to pull away. "Steve?" he'd said back, more of an exhale than actual speech. His chest moved oddly, sucking in uneven, shallow breaths. "Why can't I breathe?" he'd asked, so raw and pained and it was all Steve could do to keep it together. "It's alright," he'd assured his friend. He'd placed a warm hand over the reactor and Tony had flinched but not backed away. "You just gotta remember how to breathe with it." Tony had finally remembered after that, and his breathing had slowed down, and when he was finally taking in controlled breaths, he looked wrecked. He'd swayed a little and had not put up a fight as Steve had drawn him in to his shoulder, cupping the back of his head gently. They had stayed like that for a long time, and Steve can still feel that warmth, that gentle pressure of Tony's head on his shoulder, when he thinks about it hard enough.

The reactor was the source of much past trauma, but once Tony finally grows accustomed to it again, Steve allows himself to admit that it's a comfort to him, seeing that familiar glow, that tangible proof that Tony is alive. Steve catches himself staring sometimes, enthralled by how young and strong Tony looks, how much freer his body is from the pressures of time and war and trauma. How lithe his movements are, how bright the steel in his eyes shines. Despite the obvious differences in Tony's appearance, though, Steve finds that his feelings for his friend are no more or less strong than they were before. No one treats him any differently than before, least of all Steve, and Steve knows that Tony is glad for that.

Tony draws him in like he's got his own gravitational pull. Steve finds himself sitting on the couch in Tony's lab for long stretches of time, sketching or reading or just sitting and keeping Tony company while he works, both bobbing their heads to whatever heavy metal music Tony has screaming over the loudspeakers. On days that Rocket visits the lab, Steve keeps a close eye on them. Although Tony had probably been joking about the raccoon trying to steal the reactor, Steve takes Tony's health very seriously nowadays.
The downside to their growing friendship, Tony would probably say, is that Steve is always there to pull him away from the lab if he's been there for too long. The first time Steve had suggested he take a break, Tony had shrugged and said "You're right, I'm not 35 anymore. Oh, wait ... I am," and pulled back down the hood of his welding helmet.

Steve had opted for a gentle approach then, reaching out to gently grasp Tony's elbow until Tony had taken off the helmet with a sigh. Steve had smiled at his tousled hair and resisted the urge to wipe at the grease stain that swooped across his cheek. Instead, he had said, "Maybe instead of looking at this as a chance to rekindle bad habits, you could look at it as a chance to treat yourself better this time around." And something about it, though it had just been Steve stating what - to him - had been obvious, had made Tony look at him so strangely. His eyes had wandered all over Steve's face, as if checking for ... duplicity? insincerity? Steve didn't know. Whatever it was, Tony had eventually nodded. "Alright, Rogers. We'll try it your way." And ever since then, whenever Steve comes down and throws that pointed look in Tony's direction, Tony nods and follows him out of the workshop.

* * *

Happy flies Peter in one afternoon, and the Guardians are even more thrilled than Tony. "Hey! It's the spider-kid!" Quill announces. Peter looks decidedly shocked to see the Guardians, but he accepts the high five that Quill offers him while muttering "it's Spider-Man, man," under his breath. Drax must hear because he mumbles 'Spider-Man-Man' to himself as if trying to commit it to memory, and Steve mentally looks forward to that resurfacing again later.

Peter nearly tears up again when he sees Tony again, and Tony accepts his bone-crushing hug without protest. "Hey, Pete," he says quietly, patting the kid's back.

Peter smiles up at him. "Hey, Tony." And then he frowns a little. "Hey, I didn't say anything before, but uh, you look ... I mean not that you looked old before, but you look ... different? Did uh, why ..." and then he trails off, still staring at Tony oddly.

Tony starts a bit. "Oh, did I not mention my accidental de-aging?" He waves a hand dismissively. "Yeah, it happened in the Infinity Realm, completely an accident despite what some would have you believe."

Peter nods, although Steve is unsure if he really understands what Tony is talking about. "Oh, okay," he says distractedly, still looking at Tony. Then he notices the arc reactor. "Is that-"

"Yeah, it's in there." Tony taps lightly against it for good measure.

"Woah." And the fact that Tony stands there and lets Peter rap his knuckles lightly against it speaks volumes. "So does this mean you can't use the nanoparticles for the suit anymore?"

Tony smiles. "I'm actually working on a way to house them in here," he says, tapping at the reactor, and soon he and Peter are off to his lab, both talking animatedly. Steve watches them walk away fondly, and gets so lost in it that he doesn't notice Happy come up beside him.

"It's wild, isn't it?" Happy says with a minute shake of his head. "You didn't know Tony before, but at that age? He would'a never had the time of day for a 17 year old kid from Queens. Now look at him. That kid ... adores him."

"Tony's good with him," Steve agrees, once again feeling that warmth settling over him, blanketing him from all sides. He feels safe and protected and terrified all at once and marvels at how Tony Stark has turned him into such an oxymoron.
There is a smile in Happy's voice. "Yeah. I'm proud of him. I'm proud'a both of them."

* * *

Later, when Steve walks into the lab to call Tony and Peter for dinner, and they both start slightly, he gets the distinct feeling he has interrupted something. Tony, never one to allow a situation to make him uncomfortable, claps Peter on the shoulder and stands. "Alright, good talk. Remember my words; I may not look it anymore, but I am old and wise. Just ... speak from the heart, it'll be alright."

Peter trudges up to the kitchen, and Tony hangs back carefully, tugging lightly at Steve's sleeve to get him to do the same. "Okay, I gotta get this out. Happy is dating Peter's aunt."

"Happy's dating May?"

Tony shakes his head ruefully. "That bastard. I wonder when he was planning on telling me. Probably never, Jesus, if you only knew the trouble I went through in the 2010s to find this man a date ... hold on, you know May?"

Steve realizes then with a start that Tony does not know about the handful of times he had visited Peter after Tony's death. May had been a warm, sweet presence in the background of Steve's visits with Peter, and she had been thrilled that Steve had liked her oatmeal cookies. He tries to keep the guilt from his expression, but Tony's razor-sharp gaze hones in on it. "I ... yeah. After you ... died-" and god, that's still so hard to say, the wound is still so fresh despite undeniable proof of Tony being alive staring him right in the face. Tony winces sympathetically and the rawness of it must show on Steve's face. "After that," Steve continues, "I checked up on the kid a few times. I know Happy was already doing that, but I couldn't just ... I wanted to let him know he wasn't alone, and I told him there was still a place for him on the team if he wanted one. So, I checked in about once a month, got to know him and May."

Steve finishes with a shrug, but the way Tony is looking at him does not at all match his nonchalance. Tony's face plays through a range of emotions as he looks at Steve silently, and Steve only successfully discerns about half of them, he thinks. He opens his mouth to speak, but snaps it shut when Tony lays a hand on his shoulder, eyes burning right through Steve in a way that makes him want to shiver. "Thank you," Tony says simply, his voice rough with gratitude and the threat of tears that don't ever come. All Steve can do is nod, pinned down by that openly tortured and grateful gaze. Tony doesn't speak either, and the hand is a soft, warm pressure on Steve's shoulder. They stare at one another, and Steve gets the feeling that Tony is trying to communicate something to him, but he can't quite grasp it, because he's too busy losing himself in the moment.

The moment that's broken when Peter pops his head back into the shop. "Hey, are you guys ..." Tony snatches his hand back like he's been burnt, playing it off by running it lightly through his hair. His hair that, along with his body, is also straight out of 2008, something that everyone had found quite amusing, and that Steve had also found inexplicably endearing. He had caught Tony running his hand through it a few times, dissatisfied, and he senses a haircut is coming as soon as Tony is cleared to re-enter society. "Yeah, we're comin', kid," Tony mutters.

Steve follows his friend up to the common area, allowing himself to indulge in a few musings to the tune of Tony Stark along the way.

* * *

"The Breakfast Club was an American classic, and if you motherfuckers think any different, we might just have to fight about it." Quill gestures wildly with his fork, and Drax sits back after the second time of nearly getting stabbed in the eye. Tony watches the entire exchange with a
withering *why-me* expression, and Steve merely smirks.

Scott, who had arrived for dinner at Quill's invitation (*like Quill goddam owns the place,* Tony had muttered although Steve knows he secretly likes Lang), is diplomatic as always. "Hey, come on man. The kid is entitled to his opinions. The Breakfast Club came out during an era when kids didn't have much of a voice in entertainment, especially kids who felt like they were rejected by society because of their refusal to conform to social norms. *Now,* the media is saturated with coming-of-age stories and society is becoming more and more accepting of children displaying their independence. So, it's understandable that a kid today wouldn't find the narrative as compelling," he finishes with a shrug.

Quill and Peter stare dumbfounded. "I just thought it was kinda boring," Peter says quietly.

Quill shakes his head and mumbles something under his breath that sounds like *motherfuckers,* but Steve can't be sure.

"The kid prefers sci-fi, Quill," Tony tosses over from across the table, and Steve had pretended like he hadn't seen Tony bristle a bit when Quill had called Peter a motherfucker, though it had been said in jest.

Quill brightens considerably, and his fork assumes a much less threatening position in his hand. "Oh, man, have you heard of this movie called The Terminator?" he says to Peter as Scott leans in with vehement attention.

* * *

After dinner, all parties except Steve and Tony abscond with full stomachs to other parts of the compound, leaving clean-up duty to them. Peter politely offers to help, which is how Captain America, Iron Man, and Spider-Man end up washing dishes while Happy looks on from the common room, perfectly content to just sit and read his paper, the bastard.

"So, kid, how's school?" Tony asks conversationally as he dries a plate, though his tone carries an air of practiced casualness, and Steve suspects that Tony is either digging for information or checking in on Peter's overall wellbeing.

Peter shrugs as he wipes the countertops. "It's alright. Kinda weird that half the people I'm in school with are, like in their 20s now. But my friends all blipped, so .." in typical youthful fashion, he trails off toward the end of his thought.

"This MJ, she blipped too?"

"Yeah."

Steve doesn't miss the relieved look on Tony's face when he realizes Peter isn't dating a 22-year-old. Or semi-dating. Or whatever the kids are doing these days. And Steve, who is washing dishes, surprises everyone by asking about the whole friendly neighborhood spider business, asking about Queens and the crime, and Peter answers enthusiastically. "Crime's been pretty slow since the blip, surprisingly. I think people are just trying to adjust, you know? Mainly, me and Aunt May have been working on the Homeless Support project. Oh, by the way, she said to thank you for showing up at the gala last month. Donations went up, like a hundred percent."

Steve smiles. "Your aunt's doing some real good in the community. It was the least I could do." His smile fades when he catches Tony looking at him inscrutably, and then he realizes Tony probably doesn't know about Homeless Support, probably hasn't thought about the billions of people who
blipped and came back with no home, definitely doesn't know that Peter and May were among those people, but thanks to Pepper and Happy, they were able to purchase another apartment fairly soon. So he and Peter explain everything, and Tony reacts as little as possible to this new information.

And when conversation turns to lighter topics, Tony returns to normal, talking animatedly, promising an elated Peter, who is practically itching for field work, that they'll team up on the next available mission. That's why, when Happy collects Peter and Tony gives them both a pat on the back, and whispers to a grimacing Happy that they will be talking later, Steve is so shocked when they're finally left alone and Tony starts to cry silent tears with a hand clapped over his mouth.

Steve says his name inquisitively, suddenly feeling small and useless, and walks slowly towards his friend. "Tony, talk to me," he says quietly.

Tony shakes his head but visibly beats back an oncoming wave of tears, blinking his eyes clear, locking himself down emotionally, always pushing away, shutting it down. "I wasn't there, Steve," he says simply, devastatingly. "He was hurting and I wasn't there for him."

The admission makes something wretched rise up in Steve. He stands so close to Tony their chests are practically touching. "Tony, you're not honestly blaming yourself for that," he admonishes gently. He wants so badly just to reach out and - touch him, hug him, god, do something - but he doesn't. "If you hadn't done what you did, we wouldn't even be here having this conversation."

Tony is shaking his head. "I know, I just-" he chokes on the end of the sentence, never finishes whatever pain-drenched thing he was about to say. "But you were there, Steve. You were there for him. Just-" He shakes his head, uncharacteristically devoid of words. "Thank you."

Steve settles for a hand on Tony's elbow. Innocuous. Casual. "He's part of the team, Tony. Once an Avenger, always an Avenger. I wasn't gonna let him just fall through the cracks."

"Yeah, but you could have. He wasn't your responsibility. He was-" Tony stops himself, but the unspoken words echo in Steve's head. *He was mine.*

"You saved all of us, Tony. Don't forget that. No matter what, you can't forget that."

Tony nods, and Steve can only hope that he's listening.

* * *

That night, Steve dreams of Tony, cold and lifeless in his arms. And unbeknownst to him, Tony dreams of a dark, dead realm and of the unspeakable power held there, and when he screams *why me* into the void, the void whispers back, *because you are worthy of it.*

* * *

"I am Groot."

"You already said that. Look, all I'm sayin' is you have to be more careful with this thing."

"I am Groot."

"Yeah, well, not careful enough, apparently."

"I am Groot."

"What does it look like I'm doing, you damn Ent?"
"I am Groot?"

"No, it's ... never mind. Watch Lord of the Rings sometime; you'd like it. Or better yet, read the damn books. Kids your age don't read anymore."

"I am Groot."

"See, that's the problem with your generation right there, if it's not bright and flashy and distracting, it's not fun."

"I am Groot."

"Yeah, well, my soul is older than my body. It's a thing. Ask Steve."

"I am Groot."

"That ... was uncalled for. We spend a perfectly normal amount of time together."

"I am Groot."

"God, I think I liked it better when I couldn't understand you."

"I am Groot."

"You kiss your Rocket with that mouth?"

"... I am Groot?"

"Yeah, I'm getting there, just ... keep your leaves on." Tony fiddles with one last thing under the control panel of the game before screwing it back into place and handing it to Groot. "Alright, there you go. Take care of that thing, I'm serious. They don't make those anymore."

"I am Groot."

"You're welcome, now get outta here." Tony stands and shoos Groot toward the door of the shop. Groot stops on the way and smirks at Steve, who had been leaning against the doorframe, watching the whole interaction with amusement and, embarrassingly, fondness. He'll never tire of seeing Tony in his element, eyes bright and focused, hands moving with practiced ease and precision.

"What was that all about?" Steve asks, hoping he doesn't sound too tender.

Tony waves a hand in the direction Groot disappeared in. "Ah, he dropped that old video game, busted it up. I fixed it for him."

"What's it like? Talking to him."

Tony picks at a nail, rubs at a grease spot on the top of his hand. "Ah, it's ... I don't know, it's hard to explain. It's like I get a general sense of what he's trying to say, and somehow the words just ... fit into place."

Steve doesn't know what to say to that. For a moment, they stand together awkwardly, laser-focusing in on some minor detail in the room to avoid meeting one another's gaze. Then Tony says, "Did you need something?"

Steve scuffs a boot on the floor. "Uh, no. I just came to see if you wanted to ... I don't know, I thought you might want a break," he finishes lamely.
Tony grabs a grease rag and rubs at his hands with it. "Yeah, sure, I could use a little fresh air. The tree said it's a nice day outside. Wanna go for a walk?"

* * *

The grounds are peacefully devoid of human activity. They walk along the well-worn path that winds around the compound. Tony's face is tipped towards the sun, and he sighs peacefully, bumping shoulders with Steve just a bit until he opens his eyes again. "How is it that this lawn is always perfectly manicured? S.H.I.E.L.D. is defunct, the Avengers are disassembled, and yet somehow lawn maintenance takes precedence. Who even has the security clearance to mow this lawn?"

Steve inclines his head. "Actually, I've been keeping it up," he says sheepishly.

Tony looks at him in surprise. "Really? I mean, this property is huge, that lawn alone's gotta be-

"-About one and a half acres," Steve finishes for him.

Tony looks at him for a moment, and then laughs. It's warm as the sun shining down on them. "That's-you know I wish I could say I was surprised," he says with a smile.

Steve shrugs. "Gives me somethin' to do."

"So what, you just go out there with one of those old push mowers?" It's a joke, but Steve nods.

"Yeah. They have one of those big riding mowers, but they're too slow. And I'm old-fashioned."

"Yeah you are," Tony says, and it sounds fond. "I could help sometime, if you want. If you even need help."

"I'd like that."

* * *

Loving Peggy was warm and familiar and comforting. Loving Tony is blindingly bright and out of control, and it had really snuck up on him out of nowhere. It was no secret, in the beginning, that they had been at each other's throats. But they always fought well together. From day one, they were unstoppable in the field. Tony had the uncanny ability of anticipating Steve's next move and executing it with barely a word from Steve. It was similar to the way Nat and Clint fought, though their dynamic was a product of years of working together. Steve and Tony, they were just made for each other.

And that was how Steve and Tony became the unofficial leaders of the Avengers. Yes, the team was largely democratic in its functioning, but when it came down to it, if "Mom and Dad" were fighting, the team suffered. Needless to say, they'd gotten off to a rocky start.

Tony Stark had the ability to analyze a person, find their deepest weakness or insecurity, and pour copious amounts of salt into that wound until it nearly drove the person mad. Add that to Steve's short fuse. They had been explosive in the beginning.

Another maddening thing about Tony Stark was that, as far as he dug his nails into a person, as much as he pushed or they pushed back, he never got flustered. He was a businessman on and off the clock. Cool under pressure. That is, until Steve came along. Something about Steve incited Tony to anger more than anyone else, and there had been times when Clint and Nat had had to hold him back from all-out decking Steve. Steve, in turn, had to remind himself constantly that a blow from
him might actually land Tony in the hospital. Still, there were several times when it had been a near thing.

And then, all of a sudden, they just worked. Steve still can't pinpoint exactly when the shift had taken place, but one day he was fighting the urge to throttle Tony and throw him out the nearest window, and then the next thing he knew, they were friends. And that was another thing about Tony Stark. He was as good at making friends as he was at making enemies.

* * *

They're enjoying a peaceful night in when a commotion at the front gates activates the observation screens in the conference room. Even from the couch in the common area, they can hear the manic beeping and whirring of the sensors. Tony and Steve sit up to peer inquisitively over the back of the couch as the sound of muffled cursing and scuffing boots can be heard down the hallway. The noises grow nearer, and they turn to one another. "What the-" Tony says, but then Sam's voice can be heard, loud and distinctive.

"Hey, man watch it with that thing."

"Dude, it's a fucking metal arm. You watch it."

Finally, Sam and Bucky stumble into the common room, sore and jet-lagged. Steve and Tony jump off the couch to greet them. Steve hugs Bucky, and Sam and Tony shake hands briefly. "Isn't it past your bedtime?" Sam asks Tony. Tony snorts and does his best to look annoyed. "Fuck off, Wilson," he says good-naturedly.

Tony goes a bit still when Bucky walks up to him, but he looks the other man straight in the eyes as Bucky looks him up and down. "Heard you weren't dead," Bucky says in a tone that conveys he's nothing short of impressed.

Tony shrugs. "Surprised?"

"Nah. You're a stubborn bastard."

Tony actually smiles, and the pressure in Steve's chest finally lifts. "You got that right," Sam says. "Check this out." And he actually ruffles Tony's hair, making it stick up in all directions. "Retro," he says, and then grunts when Tony shoves him off. Tony must chalk it up to the jet-lag, because otherwise, Sam wouldn't have made it out alive for messing with Tony Stark's hair.


They wind up at the breakfast table, Sam and Bucky shoveling copious amounts of food into their mouths and talking mission details around it as best they can. Eastern Europe is nearing collapse. Latveria is the burning, roiling epicenter of it all. The rebellion had finally gained the upper hand, and Sam and Bucky and Clint had watched history repeat itself as the freedom fighters became even more corrupt than the crooked government they had overthrown. Killing dissidents in the street. Setting up stringent new policies that threatened the tenuous grasp Latveria had had on being a democratic nation. And now, the movement has spread beyond the borders of the country, bleeding into the surrounding nations, stirring up support from the dust bins of neighboring countries. Sam and Bucky and Clint had put down several skirmishes from the dust bins of neighboring countries. Sam and Bucky and Clint had put down several skirmishes in surrounding areas, but they hadn't gone into Latveria. The border is now heavily militarized, Sam informs, and they had been under orders to stay away lest they risk global backlash.

Clint, who had gone right home to Laura as soon as their plane had touched down on American soil,
had been irritated by the non-confrontational stance the Avengers had been made to take with Latveria. "We've already got a dog in the fight," he'd said. "We've made our position pretty clear. Why not just pull off the rest of the band-aid," Bucky had recalled him saying, or at least, it had been something to that effect, heavily laden with colloquialisms.

"Because The Avengers just saved this world. We don't wanna start World War III," Steve says, and it's strikingly poignant, coming from him. Bucky, who had also been alive for both World Wars and fought in one himself, nods along.

"Latveria was a ticking time bomb, this was inevitable," Tony says. "I don't see us being able to hold off interference forever."

"The U.N. has formally condemned the actions of the freedom fighters," Sam says wearily and monotone, like he's reading from a script.

"A slap on the wrist," Tony says. "But it won't deter homicidal maniacs."

"He's right," Bucky says, and Steve nods because the words ring true in his own ears. They'll be seeing the Latverians again soon, he thinks with displeasure.

* * *

And just when Steve thinks he knows his two best friends in the universe, he walks into the kitchen the next morning to find Tony and Bucky at the breakfast table, snickering like school boys over a cup of coffee. They're clad in workout gear, and judging by the sheen of sweat on their exposed skin, Steve guessed they've been sparring.

"Morning," Steve says, unable to hide his grin. Tony and Bucky's heads shoot up, looking for all the world like they've been caught, and then they promptly break out into loud laughter.

"Morning, Steve-o," Bucky says. "Hey, I was just telling Tony about Versailles, 1944." Steve's eyes go wide and Tony only laughs harder. "What was the name 'a that girl?"

"Vivienne," Steve says in ignominy.

"Vivienne," Bucky repeats to Tony, voice high and reedy with laughter.

"Havin' fun at my expense, huh?" Steve says, hating how hot his face feels.

"Always," Bucky says with a smile, and Tony is smiling too and Steve thinks it may just be the best thing he's seen all week.

"You two spar this morning?" Steve asks to change the subject.

"Yeah. Your boy's got moves," Bucky says, and Steve doesn't miss the way his stomach flips at Bucky calling Tony 'his boy'. "He's strong. He's gonna learn to control that strength, and he's gonna get even stronger," he says with an appreciative glance toward Tony, who just stares modestly into his coffee, his expression inscrutable.

* * *

"You sure you wanna do this? I'm kind of unpredictable nowadays."

"You kidding? That's what makes it fun."

Tony's face twists into a pinched expression. "We have different definitions of fun, I think."
"I dunno, Stark. I think you love a good fight just as much as the next guy," Barnes says, circling predatorily.

Tony shrugs. "You're right." And he lunges.

The strength comes and goes. Sometimes he lands a punch too hard, and other times too soft. Barnes pins him with that damn metal arm and he grunts in frustration. "You're unwieldy. You gotta harness that strength," Barnes says, panting as he eases off and onto the mat. Whether he's lost or not, Tony feels no small amount of pride to have rendered Bucky Barnes breathless.

"Can't," he grunts. "Too dangerous."

"More dangerous than if you don't learn to control it?" In lieu of an answer, Tony blows a piece of hair out of his eyes. Barnes smiles.

Tony takes a punch to the gut that doubles him over.

"You alright?" Barnes asks, and he nods, wheezing. The next time he lands a punch, it sends Barnes flying. He winces as Tony, displeased, gives him a hand up. "Listen, man. Don't fight it. You have to own it." Tony is already shaking his head, breathing heavily. "No. Come on. You think I wanted superhuman strength and a damn metal arm? I didn't. It could've made me dangerous," he says. "It did, for awhile," he emends, "But then, I learned to own it. I learned to control that strength and harness it into something that could do some good."

Tony finds himself unable to look at Barnes anymore and turns away, walking back to his starting position. "That thing in your chest," Barnes calls to him. "What does it mean?"

Tony turns around, eyes narrowed. "What?"

Barnes shrugs. "Everything means somethin to somebody," he says simply, sounding very Brooklyn when he says it. He holds up his left arm. It gleams in the dim light. "This arm: it means I turned my pain into something that could do good. Is that what that reactor means to you?"

Tony nods, devoid of words.

"Alright, then. You did that. You owned that. This," he says, waving a hand vaguely around Tony's body, in case Tony doesn't know what he's referring to. "This is just another thing. Another piece of pain that you can use. Because fuck the powers that be. Fuck the aliens and the gods and the monsters. Fuck 'em all. You're Tony Stark, and you do whatever the fuck you want." He punctuates the speech by cracking his neck emphatically. "Now, come on. I'm still jet-lagged. I need caffeine. And food. Lots of food."

* * *

"Hey, look it's metal arm guy!"

Bucky looks up from his coffee with deep chagrin. "You know, for a space alien, you sure sound like every guy I ever punched in a bar in Brooklyn."

Rocket tears his eyes away from Bucky's arm long enough to ask, "What's a Brooklyn?"

* * *

If Tony and Steve bicker like an old married couple, Sam and Bucky bicker like an even older married couple. The kind that has been married so long that each has grown to resent the other. Yeah. That's about right, Steve thinks as he watches them vie for control of the blender. And yet,
something about it makes Steve feel intensely like he's home. And yeah, he thinks as he watches Quill and Rocket bicker, Groot teaching Thor to play his video game, Drax and Mantis watching television, and Tony and Nebula talking quietly. This is home.

* * *

"Stark's a good man," Buck says to him out of nowhere. It's later in the day. Tony is squirreled away in his workshop. Steve and Bucky are playing cards while Thor and the Guardians are scattered around the compound doing god knows what.

Steve keeps his expression neutral and picks up a new card, discarding one from his hand. "Yeah, he is," he says cautiously, and the words feel detached and Buck is smiling smugly like he knows something Steve doesn't, the bastard.

Bucky selects a card from the pile, observes it, and then discards it into the smaller but growing adjacent pile. "I think we're okay now."

Steve looks up from the game. "What makes you say that?"

Bucky shuffles a few cards around in his hand, shrugs. "He apologized."

"He what?"

"He apologized for Siberia. And so did I. He told me he didn't blame me for what happened. I told him I didn't hold any of it against him" Bucky shrugs, as if it's the most natural thing in the world. As if he were commenting on the weather.

"Son of a bitch," Steve murmurs, shaking his head.

"He also told me you guys made up. As if that wasn't blatantly obvious from the way you two can't be apart for more than a few minutes at a time."

"What? That's not-"

Bucky throws down his cards with a triumphant grin. "Gin."

"...Son of a bitch!"

* * *

Codependency does have its merits, Steve thinks later, still stewing over his conversation with Bucky, as he watches Tony hit the punching bag for the 306th time. He hadn't been consciously keeping count, but at some point his brain had picked up on the rhythmic movements and never stopped. Tony had discarded his shirt after the 234th time, so that means Steve has been cataloguing every muscle in his upper body with near-scientific thoroughness for the past several minutes. His sketchbook lies completely forgotten at his side. He hasn't even picked up the pencil.

If Tony notices the staring, he doesn't comment. He just keeps going. Ever since yesterday morning, when he'd sparred with Bucky, Tony had taken on a new determination to control his new strength. The amount of broken coffee mugs was getting ridiculous, Steve admits. He can hear the difference between a regular punch and a powered punch. And so far, Tony has thrown far more regular punches.

"Tony," Steve says after awhile, and Tony shoves the bag aside roughly as he passes by to stand in front of Steve, instead of just walking around. "What, Rogers?" Steve winces but doesn't take the
bait. Tony always lashes out when he's frustrated. When it's taking him longer to solve a problem than he would like.

"You think you should take a little break?" And then at the look on Tony's face, he amends, "Just to regroup. Refocus."

Tony's shoulders drop and he sighs heavily as he drops into a chair next to Steve. He leans his head back against the wall and looks at Steve through half-lidded eyes, and Steve finds himself swallowing forcefully around the sudden dryness in his mouth. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Steve," he says, closing his eyes. "I have no frame of reference for this. What am I doing wrong?"

Steve opens his mouth to answer, but then he notices the state of Tony's hands. Gently, he picks one up to examine the knuckles that are bleeding through the tape. Tony's eyes open momentarily before sliding shut again. "For starters, you should be wearing gloves," Steve says.

"I wrapped them," Tony mumbles defensively.

Steve studies his profile before turning back to the hand, beginning to unravel the tape. "Yeah, but if you're gonna go that long and that hard, you should protect your hands more." Once he gets the tape off, he pushes the pad of his thumb gently to one of the knuckles. Tony doesn't react. He hasn't moved, in fact, since Steve picked up his hand. He probably feels awkward, Steve realizes, and sets the hand gingerly back down in his friend's lap. Get a grip, Rogers.

Tony is back to watching him again with those dark, unfathomable eyes. It's the kind of look that renders Steve speechless, and for awhile, they just sit, together but somehow miles away from one another at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Let me know what you think :)


Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! Back again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One day, months after Peggy's funeral, months after that night, Steve was hit full on with the realization of what loving Tony Stark could do to a person.

The briefing itself was straightforward: take out a small Hydra base, then strip it bare for information. One thing they hadn't expected, though, was the giant harpoon-like gun designed to capture and reel in planes from the air. And Steve had been forced to watch in abject horror as the weapon had speared right through the Iron Man suit and drug Tony to the ground. Over the ringing in his ears, Steve had been distantly aware of the Hulk's enraged scream, and the subsequent explosion that had surely marked the end of the harpoon weapon. And then he was running, tearing up the ground between him and Tony, who despite the cacophony of worried voices over the comms, remained quiet.

Steve had seen a lot of things in the war, but the sight of Tony, sprawled motionlessly on the ground, with a giant harpoon sticking out of his side, still makes Steve nauseous if he lets himself dwell on it. His knees had hit the ground hard next to Tony, and the impact jarred the breath out of him. With shaking hands he'd removed the mask. The full-body relief of Tony's eyes blinking up at him had been quickly overshadowed by the pure, cold fear of how distant they had looked, how ragged his breathing was, and how a bit of blood was trickling out the side of his mouth.

Steve had pleaded with him, *hold on Tony just hold on*, as he'd gently wiped at the blood and then ripped the remaining pieces of armor off, except for the abdominal plates, which had been fused to his body thanks to the giant spear that Steve had tried dutifully not to think about. And then the battle was over and Clint was there, pulling Tony's head onto his thigh to elevate him so he could breathe. Tony was ashen but still awake and did not protest past a wince and a slight grunt as Steve pressed against the wound to staunch the bleeding. And Nat was there, picking up one of Tony's gauntlets and melting through the metal pike to remove enough of it to make Tony mobile. And Hulk, still too anxious and livid to turn back into Bruce, had stood guard, his looming presence an inexplicable comfort.

When they had done all they could to stabilize Tony for transport, Steve had picked him up, so gently, *We gotta move, okay, Tony? I gotcha, come on*, and carried him to the quinjet. He kept up a steady flow of quiet reassurances to Tony as they walked, which the others honorably ignored. *Eyes on me, Tony, you're gonna be alright, you're gonna be fine, just stay with me.* And when they hit rough terrain and Steve's steps jarred through Tony, aggravating the injury despite his best efforts to walk smoothly. Tony hadn't made any noise, but he'd reached out to grip Steve's arm so tight it hurt. *I know, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, it's gonna be alright.* Steve had clutched Tony more tightly, wanting to just curl his entire body protectively around his friend, and Tony had just rested his head against Steve's chest, clenching one of the leather straps of Steve's uniform tightly in one hand, too pained to do much else other than offer the occasional affirmative when Steve checked if he was still awake.
By the time they'd reached the quinjet, Tony was mostly quiet, practically a dead weight in Steve's arms, and his eyes were startlingly distant. The only thing that told Steve he was still alive was the sound of each breath rattling dreadfully in his chest. By the look of the distraught, pale faces around him, he'd known the others knew it wasn't good. Steve had laid him down gently on a cot, supporting his head as Nat and Clint radioed in and prepared the jet for flight. Bruce had stumbled inside behind them, still looking a bit green but decidedly human. And when Steve had made Tony as comfortable as possible and pressed a clean cloth to the wound, he'd pressed a little harder than necessary, because Tony had that thousand-yard stare that he'd seen too many times on the battlefield, and all he could think was not him. Not him.

The pain had brought Tony back to himself slightly, and when he groaned at the pressure, Steve had apologized profusely. I know, I'm sorry, shhh. I'm sorry, you gotta stay awake. Then Tony had grabbed Steve's wrist with one blood-slick hand.

Steve.

And Steve had shaken his head. No, Tony. Don't talk. It's alright. And Tony had never been good at listening to him, ever, so why start now.

Steve, I think this might be it. Each word was pure torture, ground out between clenched teeth and pale lips. But his eyes were steady and clear and accepting.

The ringing had started again in Steve's ears then, because he had known, he had just known that was the end. Clint swore from the cockpit and Nat accelerated the quinjet with a noticeable jolt. Bruce had looked on with wide, green eyes and some distant part of Steve had worried that he'd turn into the Hulk right there in the jet just from the pure terror of watching his friend bleed out in front of him.

Steve's voice had been wretched, and he hated the way the unshed tears made his throat close up. No, no no Tony, you stay with me. We're almost there, you are not allowed to give up on me. He's grabbed Tony's hand when Bruce had regained enough sense to take over the emergency first aid. Tony's grip was weak but there, and Steve pleaded with him. Just hold on, just hold on.

And Tony had tried. He had tried so hard. Steve could see it in his face. But his breaths were getting shallower and shallower, and his eyes were starting to glaze over. He'd reached up to fumble blindly for Steve, and Steve had clutched his hand to his chest like a lifeline, still holding the other one tightly in his hand. Tony, don't do this, he'd said. Don't leave me, he'd thought.

... I'm sorry.

The smell of burnt flesh makes him sick. Now, they're back on the battlefield, and Tony is staring lifelessly at him. Everyone around them is on their knees, and Tony isn't moving, he's-

* * *

"Steve."

Someone is shaking him.

"Steve."

More insistent this time.

A hard shove that sends his whole body reeling, tumbling into the present moment. "Steeve."
He jolts awake, palms tingling, heart thumping so loud in his ears he feels it reverberating through his entire body. And Tony is right there, alive, smirking complacently down at him. "You fell asleep. Completely missed the big twist ending. Turns out Bruce Willis was dead the whole ti- ... hey are you alright?"

He realizes he's still breathing heavily, eyes wide. He probably looks like a madman. He clears his throat and nods. "Yeah. Just - weird dream."

Tony swallows heavily and nods, because he knows better than anyone. "Sorry. Almost knocking you off the couch probably didn't help..." Tony trails off, looking at him peculiarly because Steve is still drinking in the sight of him like he's never seen anything so incredible, and goddamnit, Rogers, get it together. He's fine, that was years ago. He doesn't even have the scar anymore. That's another thing about Tony at this age. His skin is virtually unmarred, aside from the reactor. No battle scars. But the memories of everything are all there and all-too-real for Steve.

Steve forces a smile. "Nah, it's alright. I'm a heavy sleeper. Remember that time I fell asleep on top of you and nearly crushed you?"

Tony chuckles, obviously relieved at the levity. "I forgot about that. A movie puts you right to sleep, doesn't it? Old man," he says with equal parts exasperation and affection.

Speaking of old men. Steve looks around for the first time, realizing they're the only ones in the room. "Where's Buck and Sam?" The movie had been their idea, after all.

Tony looks away guiltily, scratching at the back of his neck. "Uh, I'm assuming they went to bed. Though I'm not actually sure. I ... may have fallen asleep too."

Steve snorts and shakes his head. "Hypocrite," he mutters.

Tony holds his hands up in mock surrender. "Hey, I've seen the movie before, remember. Not like I missed anything."

"Old man," Steve says, and Tony smiles, which lately, always makes Steve smile.

* * *

The next morning, Steve gets a message from Bucky. Sam had finally taught him how to use a smartphone apparently. It's one photo. Steve and Tony slumped together on the couch, completely dead to the world. The message underneath says 'ain't you two cute', and Steve reads it in the same flat, smug tone Bucky would have used if he'd said it aloud. Steve texts back a middle finger but saves the photo to his phone anyway.

* * *

"Come on, Stark, just-" He hits the bag again, forcing a ragged sound of aggravation past his lips. "-Come on ..." He grunts, knuckles still raw from the last time he did this. And still, nothing to show for it. He may just be punishing himself at this point, he's realized.

"Talking to yourself. Never a good sign," says a smug voice.

His head whips up from behind the bag, and it probably looks comical but he doesn't really care. "Barton?" he pants. "The hell you doin' here?"

Clint huffs and his eyes crinkle around the corners. "Good to see you too, Tony. My trip was fine, thanks for asking," he says, voice dripping with sarcasm that makes Tony roll his eyes. "I'm out on
leave. Wife gave me a three-day pass." It's a joke but Tony does wonder. Laura Barton is a force to be reckoned with. "Saw Barnes already. Where's his other half?"

"Wilson? Flew back to D.C. for the weekend. He's leading a support group for people who Blipped or something." Sam Wilson, always using his own pain to help others. One of the many reasons Tony has always admired Sam, no matter what side of the fight they've been on. "He'll be back on Monday, unless they get called away on another mission. By the way I'm thinking of having a revolving door installed out front."

Clint chuckles. Tony's missed that sound. It's always wicked, and it's always made Tony feel like he's a coconspirator in some dastardly plot they've devised. It's very authentically Clint. "You might as well," He considers Tony for a moment. "You about to go crazy yet?" Tony's not the sitting around type and everybody knows it.

He shrugs. "I think that ship has sailed." Clint laughs and unashamedly looks Tony up and down. "My eyes are up here, Barton."

He laughs again, full and healthy. Clint Barton is nothing short of a miracle. "Sorry, man, I just can't get used to it."

"Yeah, I'm getting those kind of looks a lot lately." The others think he doesn't notice, but if he himself finds his own face disconcerting when he looks in the mirror, he knows the others do as well. They had never known him like that, except Rhodey. They'd never met the original billionaire playboy asshole, except Natasha, and Fury. And he counts it as a blessing, because they'd likely have hated him.

"Sorry," Clint says genuinely. And he probably knows the feeling. Tony still hasn't gotten used to the heavily tattooed arm and the dramatic haircut.

Tony shrugs. "It's not a big deal. It's not everyday you come back from the dead looking 'circa 2008'." He runs a hand through his hair irritatedly. "This doesn't help."

"I could help you with that."

"...What?"

Clint shrugs. "I can cut hair. Learned to cut my own as a kid, when I traveled with the carnival. Got pretty good over the years."

Tony holds up a hand. "Okay, you just said a lotta things there. You ..."

"-Can cut hair-"

"-traveled with the carnival?"

"Oh. Yeah, dude. Where else could I get so good with a bow and arrow?"

"I dunno, I just thought it was a weird hobby you took way too seriously."

"Do you want the haircut or not, Stark?"

"Depends. You're not gonna give me a mohawk are you?"

"You know what, forget it."

"-No wait! Yeah. Please." Because what the hell, it can't look worse than it already does, right?
...Alright.

* * *

When Clint's finished, he whips the towel off of Tony's shoulders with a showman's flair and uses it to dust any stray hairs off of his shoulders. Tony leans forward and examines Clint's work in the mirror, giving a low whistle of appreciation. "Damn, Barton."

Clint's reflection smiles at him. "What'd I tell ya?"

It's a little shorter on the sides than on top, styled and swooping just slightly to the right. And it's perfect. He feels like himself again. Or, at least, he thinks as he eyes the glowing cylinder in his chest, a strange amalgamation of different versions of himself. But under the circumstances, it's as good a thing as he can hope for.

* * *

Later, when Bucky and Steve and Thor are sat down for dinner, Tony and Clint join them wordlessly. Steve does a hilariously sincere double-take and nearly drops his fork. Bucky laughs loudly at Steve and Steve goes red and Tony and Clint just smile, pleased.

"Finally did it, huh?" Steve says once he's composed himself.

Tony runs a hand through the hair appreciatively, spiking it up a bit on the top. "It was driving me crazy. And despite what his hair would have you believe, Barton's a decent barber."

"Fuck you, man." Clint shoves Tony playfully. Tony pats him on the arm consolingly but takes to slipping in 'Mohawkeye' throughout dinner, because 'it's just right there, you really were asking for it with that one.' And the fact that Clint can laugh about it now is no small thing. Maybe they're all finally starting to heal.

After dinner, Steve finds himself alone with Bucky in the kitchen. His friend places a hand on his shoulder. "You got it bad, don't ya pal?" Steve doesn't answer, because he is not a redundant man, and the way Bucky had caught him looking at Tony all throughout dinner when he thought no one was watching was answer enough.

* * *

Tony eyes the mat reluctantly, already beginning to regret every decision that has lead him to this moment. "Whose idea was this exactly?"

Quill thumbs his chest proudly. "Mine. But, uh, if this goes sideways and we all die, it was Drax's."

"Nah, that won't happen. Mantis'll knock him out if he tries to go supernova," Rocket says, arms crossed definitively.

Tony shudders. "Is that supposed to be comforting?"

"Look, dude. Do you want kickass superpowers or not?"

"I do not! I just want to learn how to control them so I don't end up hurting anybody. Somehow I'm doubting you maniacs are the solution here."

Quill actually looks offended. "Come on, man. Just try it our way one time."

Tony drags a hand through his hair, and the sensation of having it short again is vaguely off-putting.
He sighs, quick and harsh. *Yep. I'm gonna die surrounded by the biggest idiots in the galaxy.* "Fine. *One* time. If it doesn't work, we're done. Now wh-

But Quill is already pointing at Tony. "Trial by fire, Drax go!" he says quickly, and Drax lets out a booming, delighted laugh, draws his knives, and bum rushes Tony.

"Shit!" Tony dives out of the way, rolling back up onto his feet, thanking his lucky stars for the 15 added years and the extra sparring sessions he's been putting in. He turns incredulously to Quill. "*This* was your plan?" But if Quill answers, Tony misses it because Drax is swiping wildly with the knives and Tony barely dodges, ducking under the knives and pushing Drax back. "Easy there, buddy," he says to Drax.

"Is it working?" Drax says loudly, presumably yelling over roar of the pure alien adrenaline pumping through his veins.

"No, it's not!" Tony says, feeling compelled to yell back for some reason. Drax, the madman, raises a knife high and brings it down in a wide arc - and Tony catches it. They both stand in a deadlock, equally shocked, straining against one another. Drax lets out a pleased roar of exertion and Tony yells back from the strain, holding Drax's arm aloft -

"What the hell?"

Everyone whips their heads toward the source of the interruption. "Oh, hey, Steve," Tony says calmly, arm still held high with a vice-like grip on Drax's arm.

"Tony, what-" and Steve's eyes dart back and forth between him and Drax and he looks about ready to start throwing punches.

Quill, undoubtedly unwilling to pick a fight with his childhood hero, whistles shrilly. "Alright, team, good work now scatter!" He bolts to the door, Rocket and Mantis following close behind him.

Drax lowers his arm and nods to Tony. "Farewell. I hope that we fight again. I quite enjoyed this." And then he runs, too, leaving Tony alone with Steve's righteous American ire.

"Wanna explain?" Steve prompts carefully.

"Uh, yeah. So, hindsight is 20-20, and ..."

"-And you're an idiot," Steve concludes.

"Well, okay, in my defense, I did not think this was a good idea-"

"... That's your defense??"

"You know, before Bruce went full-Hulk, his abilities were activated by fear and stress." Tony shrugs. "It was worth a shot."

Understanding lights in Steve's eyes, and he steps closer. "Potentially volatile, world-ending power, Tony," he reminds softly. "Probably shouldn't be poking that bear."

Tony lets his shoulders drop. "Yeah, you're right. I just- I'm trying here, Steve, and I'm getting nowhere. It still comes and goes. It's violent and unpredictable and as long as I can't control it, I'm a threat."

He stays silent after that, feeling himself retreating inward under Steve's gaze, until Steve nods. "I
think I might have an idea."

* * *

"Just breathe ..."

"Do you do yoga? I could see you doing yoga," Tony says, shifting uncomfortably.

"Focus, Tony," Steve prompts.

"Violent yoga, maybe. Is that a thing?"

"I think it's called Tai Chi. Now relax and focus."

He sighs, closing his eyes. "Have you been talking to Strange? Because this is the kind of positive energy crap he would probably go for-"

"Tony."

"... Fine."

He breathes in and out slowly, savoring the feeling of the air entering and leaving his lungs freely. Then, he takes another breath, opens his eyes, and exhales as he punches the bag as hard as he can and-

"-Nothing." He steps away, already starting to pull off the hand wraps, feeling disappointment curl in his gut, but Steve grabs his upper arm.

"Tony, come on, try again." And something in his eyes is so sincere, he can't help but be drawn into Steve's optimism. Alright, Rogers. We'll do it your way.

He steps back up to the bag, conscious of Steve's presence behind him. "Just concentrate on that energy inside. Tune everything else out. Keep your cool, focus." Steve's voice is quiet and he closes his eyes, letting the words wash over him. He nods, adjusting his stance, raising his fists.

He breathes in. He focuses inward, searching for the thing that's been there ever since he came back. The thing he's been avoiding because it's so much a part of him. It flows through every inch of his body, completely intermingled with his own essence, his own sense of self. It's bright and intense, and he forces the chaos down, lets the calm flow through, the acceptance. Somewhere deep inside, something whispers you are worthy of it, and it's like a long-forgotten dream. He inhales sharply, eyes flying open, chest heaving, muscles coiling tight, and he unleashes it.

The force of the punch knocks the bag off the chain. It lands halfway across the room, split apart at the seam. The boom reverberates throughout the room, and they stand in in quiet disbelief. He turns to Steve, eyes wide, swaying just a bit. Steve's gaze is impenetrable, piercing. Tony fights back a shiver as the sweat cools on his skin.

* * *

When Steve is alone in his room, he finally lets it all wash over him. His knees hit the back of the bed and he lets gravity pull him down. Lets it all come crashing down on him until he's shaking with it. In that moment, he misses Nat so much it hurts. Because Nat had always been there. She had always known what to do. She had rallied the team after the decimation, somehow found enough strength to keep herself and the rest of them going. And Steve allows one harsh, dry sob to escape from his chest, because he was never as strong as her.
"I don't know what to do.

* * *

"Well, neither does he. You thought about that? Think about how he probably feels right now."

Steve hangs his head, wincing around the growing chagrin the words are causing. "He's probably scared."

Bucky sits back, somehow satisfied with that. "He probably is. Just like you are."

Steve watches the trees dance in the breeze with barely comprehending eyes. Inside of his head, a disaster reel is playing over and over, and he feels buried under the weight of that potentiality.

"Squirreling away and beating yourself up about not knowing what to do isn't gonna solve anything, Steve. And avoiding him certainly isn't gonna help. He doesn't need you to be strong, he needs you to be there."

Steve sighs. "Goddamnit, Buck, when'd you start makin' so much sense?"

Bucky grins. "I've always made sense. You've just always been too goddamn stubborn to listen to me."

* * *

"I like it out here." The voice is cold in contrast to the hot, suffocating night. "It is peaceful."

He doesn't say anything as she sits next to him, doesn't feel the need. That's one thing about Nebula; she does not deal in frivolities. It's a breath of fresh air at the times when it's difficult for him to breathe.

"How'd you know where to find me," he asks after awhile.

"In battle, when one is running out of options, it is wise to seek out higher ground," she says sagely.

"You stole that from Sun Tzu," he says with no real heat, and when he turns to look at her, she is glaring, not menacingly, but discerningly, eyes sweeping critically over his face.

"This power. You're afraid of it."

"What, you gonna tell me that fear leads to the dark side or something."

As always, she dutifully ignores his earth nonsense. "Fear can be both a powerful motivator and a powerful paralytic."

He looks up at the stars so he doesn't have to look at her. In the darkness, the arc reactor glows noticeably through the thin fabric of his t-shirt, and he feels more than sees her staring at it, analyzing it quietly. "The energy output of that thing is ... impressive," she admits.

The vague memory of him telling her about the reactor, half-delirious from starvation, floating in the vast emptiness of space sneaks up on him. He grins crookedly. "Told ya, I make the best stuff," he says simply.

They are silent for awhile, and he lets the memory wash over him. She had helped him sit up against a wall in the cabin of the ship. His breathing had been labored and his eyesight was starting to go. She wasn't much better, but she was enhanced, could survive longer in that state than he could. He
would definitely die first, he'd known that from the start. He'd started rambling and couldn't find it in himself to stop. He told her about Afghanistan, about the reactor, about Iron Man, and she'd listened, nodded, soaked it in. 'You were like me, once,' she'd concluded and it hadn't occurred to him before then. 'Huh,' he'd said. 'Guess i kinda was'. She'd leaned against the wall next to him. 'There are days that I feel more like a machine than a living being.' He'd shaken his head, honestly pouring out of him because he no longer had the strength to hold it back. 'I don't see it like that.' She'd looked at him oddly, but almost grateful. 'You're more alive than most people I know.'

Her voice brings him back into the present. "You are a formidable warrior. Stop feeling sorry for yourself," she says. "Stop being afraid of who you are." She stands up and walks to the door to exit the rooftop. "Get a hold of yourself," she calls over her shoulder.

When the door slams behind her, he chuckles. "Good pep talk," he says aloud, and for the first time today, he's actually smiling.

* * *

He's not expecting it to be Steve when someone knocks on his door later that night. He's also not expecting Steve to envelop him in a hug as soon as he gets a foot in the door. He stands rigid and awkward at first until his brain finally catches up and tells him to do something, damnit. So he swallows the panic that emotional displays always give him and pats Steve's back gently. "Okay, uh, this is happening. Alright, um," he babbles incoherently.

Mercifully, Steve lets go and moves back just a step to grab his shoulders tightly. "Tony, I'm sorry about today. I shouldn't have run off. I panicked. But I promised I wouldn't leave you again. I promised I had your back and I still mean that."

He blinks owlishly for a moment, words caught in his throat because Steve is just so damn sincere and he can hardly take it. "Oh. Okay, Steve. It's okay." He nods, patting Steve's arm for good measure, feeling the iron-like tension there let up just a bit.

Steve removes one hand to place it on his arm, right over Tony's hand. "We'll figure this out. Together."

Tony nods, feeling calm as the warmth of the words fills his chest. "Together."

* * *

Sam returns from DC and Fury is right there with him, burning a clear, purposeful path to the kitchen where Steve and Tony are eating breakfast.

"Wilson," Tony says in fake consternation, "What did I say about bringing home strays?"

Fury smiles. "Nice to see you too, Stark. Captain," he nods at Steve and then casts a watchful eye around the room, eyeing Groot warily. "Where's the rest of the Addams Family?"

"I am Groot."

Fury looks back to Steve and Tony.

"He said 'how should I know', but with more profanity. The Guardians keep to themselves mostly, except when they don't." And then to Groot, he says, "You really do need to watch your language."

"I am Groot."
"Hey, do as I say, not as I do."

Groot huffs and lounges lazily against the back of the couch, video game beeping and whirring loudly.

"You understand that thing?" Fury asks, incredulous.

Tony shrugs and makes a noncommittal noise. Then, "To what do we owe the pleasure, Nick?"

"I come bearing gifts." Fury slaps a file down on the counter in front of Tony.

"Well it's only right. You missed my birthday this year."

"You were dead on your birthday this year, Stark," Fury deadpans, unimpressed.

"Excuses, excuses," Tony mutters, but picks up the file anyway, thumbing through it quickly. "Is this-"

"-Your cover story," Fury confirms. "Ready to officially rejoin the land of the living?"

"Oh hell yes."

* * *

News of Tony Stark being alive reverberates like the shot heard around the world. It's all the news feeds are talking about, and #IronManLives trends on Twitter for days. Pepper bravely holds a press conference while the news is still fresh, handling the mania with grace and dignity and power while privately admitting to Tony that she'd strangle him if she weren't so relieved to have him back. Though Pepper is the CEO now, Tony had always helped her shoulder the responsibility. Still, despite how badly Pepper wanted him back, they'd agreed that he wouldn't make an appearance until the media frenzy had died down.

The Guardians will leave, it is decided, to find Gamora. Thor will hitch a ride with them into space and from there he doesn't know, but "You are learning to control the power of the stones, and Asgard has a king once again. I am no longer needed here," he assures them quietly, with a hint of sadness.

* * *

It's Scott's idea to throw a goodbye dinner for Thor and the Guardians, and surprisingly, everyone takes to it immediately. Tony and Steve make some calls, and Rhodey shows up as well as Happy and Peter and Sam and Bucky. Clint is there already, and Bruce is the last to show up. Dinner is chaotic, and they have to drag in two conference tables to accommodate everyone, and Bruce barely fits at the table, but it's worth it, and it feels right, and it feels like a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing to have everyone together.

Peter sits on one side of Tony and Nebula sits on the other side. Tony speaks frequently to her and Steve marvels at their relationship. Scott and Quill keep up a steady flow of conversation, and Scott suggests they exchange phone numbers before realizing 'aliens probably don't have phones do they', to which Quill tries his best to explain interplanetary communication devices. Scott understands next to none of it and finally says "you know what, why don't you just look me up if you're ever in town." Rocket looks appalled at the entire conversation and asks, "How have you managed to survive so long with such a puny brain??" Steve admires the way Scott shrugs, unperturbed at the insult.
Tony translates a bit for Groot if one of the Guardians is otherwise occupied, and Rhodey and Clint and Peter and Happy all marvel at it, since Tony is the only Earther to have picked up Groot's language. Clint and Sam and Bucky exchange mission stories, and Quill tells a few (probably aggrandized) tales himself. Bruce and Thor talk quietly to one another for the most part, but Steve distinctly hears Bruce promise to check in on New Asgard and someone named Valkyrie often, and he hears Thor promise not to be gone for too long if Bruce promises not to disappear again. "You could come with me, you know," Thor says quietly, and Bruce shakes his head, muttering something Steve can't hear of the cacophony of voices, but Thor seems to accept it solemnly, so Steve assumes it's a no. Clint makes an effort to talk to Drax and Mantis, and Mantis does a quick demonstration of her powers on Drax, in which she touches Drax's arm and pronounces that he is 'happy at the moment, but sad in anticipation of leaving tomorrow'. Clint nods but looks disappointed and less-than-convinced at the lackluster performance. "That was great," he mutters, unenthused, but Mantis, oblivious, beams and thanks him excitedly.

And when dinner is over and everyone leaves or goes to bed, Steve and Tony sit, awake, in the newly cleaned kitchen. "We did good tonight," Tony says with a satisfied grin.

Steve smiles. "Yeah, we did."

"God, I can't believe I'm kinda gonna miss those weirdos. We should make this a thing, with the home team. Get all the Earthers together a couple times a year, when everyone's around."

Steve nods. "You know this team doesn't work without you, right?" he says suddenly. He's not expecting the words, but they come from deep within him and it suddenly feels of the utmost importance that Tony knows that. "I can't lead this team on my own. I need you on this, Tony."

Tony frowns at the turn in conversation but nods. "I know, Steve. I'm right here. Not goin' anywhere."

"I guess what I'm trying to say is, if this team's gonna have a leader, I need it to be both of us."

Tony is still for several long moments, and then he laughs. "I'm not really co-captain material, Cap. Besides, you ever heard the phrase too many cooks in the kitchen?"

"I disagree. I think you're exactly what this team needs. You keep me honest. You hold me accountable, and you have my back. We're better together; that's just how it is. Just ... think about it, okay?"

Tony leans on his hand and squints at Steve so long he fights the urge to squirm under the gaze. He holds firm, though, and doesn't take his eyes off Tony, doesn't budge an inch. Eventually, finally, Tony nods. "Alright."

"Alright you'll think about it?"

"Alright I'll do it."

* * *

That night, his dreams carry him somewhere new and improbable. He is standing in about six inches of water, which ripples serenely despite the complete absence of a breeze. All around him, the sky is on fire. The horizon stretches out wide and thin on all sides and he gets the feeling that he could walk for an eternity and never find an end to this place. This strange world is completely empty except for him, except for now it isn't, because he makes another full turn and suddenly what looks like a small, single-story pagoda finds itself in his field of vision. He looks more carefully, and now a woman
stands there as well. She is humanoid in appearance but her skin is green, and her hair is fiery red on the ends, more brilliant than the endless sky around and above them.

"Who the hell are you?" he asks, because he's so far past charming and witty at this point. His voice sounds small in the overwhelming vastness of this world.

She levels a curious squint in his direction. "You're Tony Stark," she says, and he will never get over the endless recognition that evil or disconcerting beings seem to have for him.

"You know me?" he asks suspiciously. She carries a long sword, but it is sheathed at her hip, and her arms are crossed lazily. He gets the sense that if she wanted to be a threat, she could be. But for now, they are just two beings sharing a conversation.

"I do," she says, and it takes him back to another time, and he shivers, despite the comfortable warmth of this world on fire. She steps down from the pagoda and moves to stand in front of him. He fights the urge to recoil. "You thwarted my father's plan to take over Earth years ago. We all knew your name after that. My father was furious, but you gained his respect that day. Now you've defeated him once and for all. And for that, you have my respect."

A name drops into his head then and understanding finally hits him. "You're Gamora."

She nods.

"Where are we?"

She inhales deeply and looks to the horizon. "A realm between realms. Some call it a pocket dimension. Some just call it the End."

He puts aside his scientific queries because he has learned at this point not to question the things that strange beings from other planets tell him. "Thanos killed you to get the Soulstone," he says, and she grimaces but nods. "That - would explain why you're here. If part of the Soulstone is inside of me, I suppose my subconscious has access to this place."

She nods and she does not seem surprised.

"But you already knew that, didn't you." It's not a question.

She smiles and it's oddly disarming from such an imposing individual. "There isn't much I don't know, now."

"So you know they're looking for you. The other you. Past you. Whatever."

"Yes."

"Any chance you could give us a clue? Might make it easier on Quill, he misses you a lot."

She smiles. "I miss him, too. I miss them all. But I'll see them again, and for now they still have work to do." She pauses for a moment, eyes dancing, and he waits patiently. "Tell them if they want to find me, go back to the beginning of it all."

"That's ... irritatingly cryptic. Guess I should suspect that from dead beings now."

"We can't upset the delicate balance of the universe."

"Yeah. Right. Not like that's already been done a thousand times over."

"We can't upset the delicate balance of..."
"Tell them I miss them," she continues, ignoring him. "Tell them I'm sorry we didn't get more time together, but they'll see me again, in this life and in the next."

He nods. "I can do that."

She regards him more warmly now. "My sister likes you. She doesn't like very many people."

He shrugs. "Can't say I know why. But I'm glad."

"I think I know why," she says with a smile, and when she says nothing more, he finally dares to ask it.

"Do you know Natasha Romanov? Have you ... have you seen her?" He hates how raw the words sound when they escape his mouth.

She smiles. "Hold tight to your friends, Tony Stark. You could do great things, but not alone. Never alone," she says, and it feels like a goodbye.

"No, hold on, hold on, wait!-

You are worthy...

* * *

He wakes up cold and alone and far too early, but his body and mind are far too awake to go back to sleep, so he drags himself out of bed and into the kitchen, wincing as his feet hit the cold tile. Steve is awake, already nursing a half-empty cup of coffee. He looks startled to see Tony, and when Tony sees that the clock reads 5 a.m., he understands why.

"Tony? You alright?" Steve asks, concerned, because he's always concerned.

He must look harried, disheveled, exhausted, or any combination of the three. He pours a cup of coffee and clutches it desperately as he sits down across from Steve at the breakfast table. "Couldn't sleep," he says quietly. "I saw someone."

A frown forms on Steve's brow. "What do you mean?"

Tony takes a fortifying gulp of the coffee. "Nebula's sister. Gamora. I saw her, spoke to her somehow. She was ... somewhere else. Somewhere beyond this realm." Damn it, when did he start using words like 'realm'?

It must sound strange on Steve's ears too. "Tony..." he begins cautiously.

Tony leans forward, effectively cutting him off. "Steve, I'm being serious. She was sacrificed for the Soulstone; I think it ... let me see her."

Steve leans back in his chair, nodding, and Tony knows he believes him, because he always believes him. Steve Rogers is a man of virtue, and he has placed his trust in Tony Stark for some insane reason. "What did she say?" he asks quietly.

Tony finds himself grimacing. "She said a lot of things but couldn't give me any answers. Said it would upset the balance of the universe. I asked her about Nat, but she didn't-" he stops and looks out the wind, nostrils flaring as he breathes deeply. Then, a warm pressure on his wrist makes him look back. Steve has placed his hand over Tony's, and he's just looking at him. And something in the way Steve looks at him lately makes him feel like he'll never be alone again. Hold tight to your
friends, Tony Stark. He grabs the hand, suddenly feeling desperate. He bites his lip for fear of saying too much, and Steve just looks at him.

"It's okay, Tony." The words are soft and they roll over him soothingly and he wants to curl up and cry right there, but instead he just squeezes Steve's hand and nods.

"I miss her, Steve."

"I know. Me too."

* * *

"Tony, you should sleep."

He looked up from the schematic, eyes tired and unfocused, but they had crinkled at the sight of her. It was only a half-smile but it was the closest he ever got in those days. "Haven't you heard? I don't sleep. Not anymore."

Nat had snorted. "You've evolved without us then."

He flicked the schematic closed lazily. In the span of three hours, he'd done next to nothing with it anyways.

"Who are you thinking about tonight?" It had become a ritual back then. If more than one of them was awake, sometimes they'd exhume old memories of the ones they'd lost. It had hurt, but it was a good pain, a healing pain.

"The kid."

She was silent for awhile after that. 'The kid' was a touchy subject. They didn't speak about 'the kid', not with Tony. Not since the day he'd gone to the kid's apartment and found his aunt gone too. Not since he'd come back clutching that small photograph, pale and uncharacteristically silent. Not since he'd started keeping it in his wallet, but he was pretty sure only Nat had seen that.

And she'd sat down next to him wordlessly, placed a hand on his arm, and just sat with him, and that had been enough because somehow she had known that was exactly what he'd needed.

Nat, we didn't deserve you.

* * *

He hadn't been sure what reaction he was going to get, but calm resignation from Nebula and anger from Quill is not was he'd been expecting.

"What the hell are you talking about, man? Gamora's dead. She-" His voice breaks and he steps toward Tony looking dangerously close to doing something he'd regret later if the look on Steve's face is anything to go by.

"Quill, shut up. Idiot," Nebula says with venom. "What did she say?" She says to Tony calmly.

"She couldn't tell me much," he says apologetically. "But she did say she misses you. She's sorry she didn't get more time with you. She'll see you again, in this life and in the next."

Quill rakes a hand through his hair and mumbles something incoherent. Mantis looks close to tears and Rocket and Groot and Drax are uncharacteristically solemn.
"She's out there, Quill," Tony says, sympathetic. "She said if you want to find her, 'go back to the beginning of it all'.

Quill shakes his head. "What, what does that mean," he asks edgily.

"You don't think she's on Xandar do you?" Rocket says.

Nebula nods. "If she is anything like I remember, she may very well be there. When she left our father, she had nothing but hatred and a specific skillset that made her very dangerous."

"She was a mercenary right? You can always find someone with a grudge on Xandar."

"We'll go to Xandar first. Ask around. Can't hurt," Quill says. He looks at Tony. "Thank you," he says sincerely, reaching out to shake Tony's hand.

Rocket steps up next and holds something out for Tony. It's some kind of communication device from what Tony can tell, but the circuitry is foreign. The interface has obviously been modified to mimic the basic Latin alphabet. "You can probably guess what this is," Rocket says. "Keep in touch."

Tony nods. "You too, Ratchet," he says with a smirk.

"You're an asshole, Stark. But I'll miss that workshop 'a yours."

Tony smiles. "Yeah you will. I've got the coolest toys."

Mantis, unnervingly, steps in front of him and places a hand on his arm. He inhales quickly, eyes wide, but all does is whisper, "I know what you want. Do not waste your second chance."

He is reeling but he doesn't have much time to wonder, because Nebula is there in front of him, fixing him with that dark gaze. Saying goodbye to her is unexpectedly difficult. "You'll find her," he says quietly. "I know you will."

She nods. "Yes. Take care of yourself."

"No promises," he says lightly.

She nods and taps her left arm with two fingers, right where a portion of it has been replaced with a piece of Tony's armor. It's a kind of salute, and Tony smiles because it's her way of saying goodbye, and he couldn't have said it better himself.

Chapter End Notes

Okay yes I definitely used a Gamora quote for Tony's inner monologue because Tony reacting to the Guardians and Gamora reacting to the Guardians is the exact same energy imo. Plus, foreshadowing :)

Also, thanks so much for reading! And I'd love some feedback so please let me know what you think :)
Chapter 6

He meets the Mad Titan himself that night, in the realm of the Soul Stone.

"Stark." The voice alone threatens to overtake him, and he looks down at the water beneath him, wondering what lies below and if he could be dragged into its depths. Then, a realization. We won. And this new thought fuels him on, gives him the strength to stare death himself in the face.

"Which one are you?" He hopes it's the second one, the earlier one. The one he got to look right in the face as he snapped his fingers ...

"I am all."

He sneers. "You're nothing. You're dead. We won." He shrugs. "The universe is safe."

The eyes are cold, but there is recognition in them. "For now," he admits. You have my respect, Stark.

He steps up to the Titan, head high, eyes steely, glaring, defiant. "Always," he corrects. "As long as there is breath in my lungs, as long as there is hope in the universe ... as long as the Avengers are around, beings like you will never win."

"Beings like me," he muses. "There is no one like me."

"There are always beings like you. And they'll always fail. You can count on that."

"Do you wonder, Stark, why we're here?"

His eyes narrow. "No."

"I do. The stones have a mind of their own, you know. Perhaps they wanted to show you what awaits people who wield the stones. Perhaps I am your future, Stark. This-" his hand sweeps over the fiery horizon, "-is your future."

"No," he says again, and he is surprised that his voice holds strong.

"There is no way of knowing," he concedes. "But ... perhaps the possibility will torment you ... until your very last breath."

He laughs, and it feels righteous. "You really are pathetic. I won't end up like you, no way. Not as long as I have my team. Something you wouldn't understand. You daughter knew it. Both of your daughters. And they did great things, and they will do great things. And that's why I can sleep soundly, because I know that there are people like them out there, and because I know that I'll be right there to help them when they need it."

The looming evil towers over him, leaning in, grabbing his head, and he flinches at the memory, winces as the hand tightens around his skull. The voice is dark and venomous. "If you're right, Stark, and there are other beings like me out there ... watch your back." And with that, the hand shoves him down, into the depths of the water below, which had seemed so shallow but now is infinitely deep. He cannot breathe, cannot see, he-

"Tony!"

He launches forward, connecting with something large and solid, and hits the floor with a grunt.
Something heavier thuds next to him. It is still so dark and cold and he scrambles back, searching blindly for cover until his back connects with something hard and flat. He presses himself against it, eyes wide and unseeing. His breath will not stay in his lungs. His chest heaves and he nearly gags on the lack of air, choking, gasping. His ears are ringing so loud it hurts. Something touches him, and he grabs it and twists sharply, hearing something pop, and throwing it off of him. Whatever it is grunts and rears back, but it does not touch him again.

His head pounds, and the giant hand is still grabbing him, squeezing the life out of him. He shudders and cradles his own head in his hands, rocking, unable to fight back against what he cannot see.

"Tony." This voice is not like the other one. It is softer.

His hands are shaking, and his eyes are wide but it's so dark, so completely dark he cannot see. "Tony, come on. It's okay." The voice again. It's familiar. Warm.

"Wake up." It's so gentle. Always so comforting.

Recognition settles in his chest, and the warmth of it spreads outward to the rest of his body, helping to restore some of the feeling in his limbs. He blinks. "Steve," he says at last, barely a breath, but Steve hears it, because he sighs with relief and grabs Tony's shoulder. Then finally Tony's sight returns to the present moment, away from that nightmare world, and Steve is right there in front of him, looking exhausted but so relieved. And it's almost too much for him, seeing Steve there now. "Oh god, Steve," he says desperately, bringing his head low and clutching it, because he can still feel that phantom pain. He wants to curl in on himself completely, escape everything.

"Hey, hey. Hey, it's okay, Tony. It's okay. You're alright," Steve whispers. Warm hands slip hesitantly underneath his, cradling his face softly and gently, thumbs wiping away tears that he didn't know were there. And the words, he believes them. He closes his eyes, suddenly exhausted with the relief that they bring. He loses time, and then hands are slipping down to his shoulders and under his arms and he is being hoisted off the ground, his arm pulled around Steve's neck, still shivering slightly but better, much better, and safe, because Steve is there and holding him tight. Steve always has his back. And then Steve is helping him into the bed and curling himself around him, shielding him from anything and everything, and after that, he sleeps soundly.

* * *

He wakes up sore and confused and hot, and something is wrapped around him, trapping him. He struggles wildly for a moment. "Tony, stop. It's me, stop," Steve says, holding him still with obvious effort. He stops. "Oh, god. Shit," he pants. Then he sits up too fast and his vision goes black around the edges. He chokes back a groan, grabbing his head, and the events of last night play out again in horrific detail.

A hand comes up to rest on his back, and he flinches but does not move away. "Tony, what happened?"

He lifts his head from his hands with obvious effort, squinting in the soft light of dawn. "I saw him, Steve."

Steve frowns. "Who?" He does not answer, only looks on, and realization dawns in Steve's eyes. "Oh god," he whispers. And then his hands are grasping Tony by the shoulders, moving up into his hair, frantically checking for injuries. "What happened? Did he hurt you?" And he almost has to laugh, because the concept is completely ridiculous, yet somehow a distinct possibility.

"No," he says emphatically. And then he tells Steve the whole thing.
When he has told all there is to tell, they sit in mutual horror. Steve's eyes are wide and unfocused, but they do not leave his face, and he knows it's a protective instinct, that some part of Steve probably worries he'll be sucked back into that realm just by reliving the memory of it. He is not, will not, he decides. As if it were even up to him. But some part of him knows that this strange world is only accessed through his subconscious mind.

"Why, Tony?" Steve whispers finally.

For once, he has an answer. "I think ... they're trying to tell me something." He doesn't have to explain who 'they' is, not to Steve. "I think something else is coming. A threat. I think that's what they wanted me to know, that's why they showed him to me."

Steve nods grimly, and Tony wonders when it was that they both started to trust one another so completely. His eyes wander languidly around Steve's general area as he contemplates this, until that nagging feeling that something is off finally becomes something tangible. Steve's right wrist is darkened with bruises. Probably days old by any normal standard, but Tony is aware of just how fast his healing factor is, and for Steve, it could have been just hours ago. Was ... just hours ago.

Steve follows his line of sight and quickly moves his left hand over the area. It's not subtle. Tony feels sick. "Did I do that," he says. It's hardly a question, though he wishes it were.

"Tony..." It's all the confirmation he needs.

He brings a hand up to his face, head still pounding. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Steve grabs his shoulders tight, shaking him just slightly, just enough to jar him out of his downward spiral. "Tony," he says fiercely. "Stop."

"Did I break it," he asks, feeling oddly detached from it. A distance between them of his own making.

"It's fine. You didn't know. I shouldn't have touched you, I should know that by now. It was my mistake."

"God, Steve that shouldn't be an issue. I'm dangerous, I-"

"-You're not," Steve interrupts. His hands are still on Tony's arms, framing him tightly. "You're not," he repeats gently, hands softening. His thumbs rub soothingly along Tony's biceps, and Tony closes his eyes, fighting the urge to lean into it, wishing he could just curl up against Steve and sleep off what feels like the worst hangover in history.

"I'm sorry," he whispers anyway.

"It's okay. It's okay."

He lets himself believe that.

* * *

Mercifully, no one else is at the compound. Everyone else had left yesterday after the Guardians did, to tie up various loose ends or to go back to their normal lives. He and Steve sit in various positions of repose for most of the morning, until a frustrated sound rips from Tony's chest and he stands, dragging a hand through his hair, pulling slightly at the longer strands on top. He looks at Steve. "I'm gonna go crazy if we don't do something," he says desperately.
So they end up in the gym. Tony goes through two punching bags before Steve finally stops him and suggests that they spar instead. Reluctantly, Tony acquiesces, because Steve’s wrist looks like it’s finally healed. He walks to stand on the mat in the starting position, and Steve joins him. Whether the frustration fuels him or he’s simply getting better at harnessing his strength, Tony fights with a raw desperation that Steve has never seen in him before. And then Steve throws a punch that’s a bit too wild and Tony catches his fist in midair, holds it steady above his head, and lands a blow to Steve’s abdomen that doubles him over and forces the breath from his chest.

"Shit, Steve-" Tony says, and Steve feels frantic hands traveling over him, but he merely catches he stands upright, still wheezing, but smiling. Tony stops, hands still raised, and it only makes Steve smile wider. "Are you ... okay?" Tony reaches out as if to touch Steve but decides against it halfway there, his hand hovering somewhere between them.

Steve shakes his head. "No, I'm fine, Tony. You did good."

"I didn't hurt you?"

Steve shrugs. "It stung a bit. But that's what sparring's all about." He slaps Tony on the arm and gets back into a ready position. "Come on. Show me what else ya got."

Turns out, he has a lot. When Steve learns to adjust to his added strength and resilience, he starts to enjoy himself. He shows Tony a few new moves, and when Tony executes one of them too well, Steve ends up flat on his back on the mat. Chuckling, he hooks a leg around Tony's and drags him down too. Tony lands on top of him with a pained groan, but he's laughing too, the corners of his eyes crinkling. Then, he stops and for a second, he's looking at Steve differently. It's an intense gaze and Steve is suddenly very aware of how close their faces are, their noses nearly touching, until Tony gets up and offers Steve a hand, pulling him to his feet. They're both breathing heavily and there's a flush along the top of Tony’s cheekbones. His shirt clings to his sweaty torso, and Steve purposefully keeps his eyes above the neck.

"We should probably stop now before one of us breaks something," Steve says with a wry smile.

Tony nods and throws Steve a towel, wrapping his own around his neck. "Probably right. You hungry? What am I saying of course you are. Let's go eat."

* * *

"Steve, tell me I'm not crazy," Tony requests over lunch.

"You're not crazy, Tony," Steve says easily around the edges of his sandwich.

"I'm serious here, okay? I mean, I really feel strongly about this, and yeah I have a lot of strong feelings, so maybe it's nothing. But maybe, the stones were trying to warn me about something." He takes a sip of water. "Then again, maybe I'm just completely insane. I haven't ruled out that possibility. There's like a ... 48% chance I'm just insane."

Steve raises an eyebrow. "Only 48?" At Tony's flat look, he continues seriously. "You're not crazy. I'm worried about this, too. We need to start putting a team together."

Tony sits back, pushing his plate away from him. Steve takes the hint and pulls it towards himself, finishing off the rest of the sandwich. "So, let's take stock of our assets. Carol Danvers?"

"Off-world," Steve mumbles through a mouthful.

Steve looks down. "Awol."

Tony looks away and clears his throat before continuing. "So that leaves us with Lang, Clint, Strange, Rhodey, Barnes, Sam, and Bruce. And maybe Wong if he wants in. I did invite him to my birthday party, but since I wasn't around to have it at the time, I kind of owe him something."

Steve smirks. "Don't forget the king and the kid."

"T'Challa has a country to run and five years of catching up to do on foreign and domestic affairs," Tony says carefully. "He may not want to get involved right now. But if anything comes of this, we'll send him a message."

"Okay, so the kid."

Tony is purposefully still, doesn't say a word.

"Tony-"

"-I don't ... I don't think it's a good idea. He's too young, he-"

"-He's always gonna find the fight, no matter how hard you try to keep him away from it, Tony. You know that," Steve says gently.

Tony anguishes silently for a moment. "I know. I know, but he's so young, Steve. You-" his voice cuts out for a moment before he recovers "-You weren't there. He was so scared, and I couldn't do a thing. I'm not gonna watch him die again." His eyes are bright now, and Steve gives him a moment before speaking again.

"Things'll be different this time," Steve says quietly.

"How can you possibly know that," Tony asks, sounding exhausted.

"Because this time ... we'll be together," Steve says confidently. And that has to mean something. He can tell by the look in Tony's eyes that it means something. Together, they're unstoppable.

* * *

He's not expecting his first outing to be to the New York Sanctum. But, in light of the events of the past few months, he should really stop having expectations altogether. Forget a normal life. Any morning that he wakes up and the world hasn't ended should be counted as a victory. The last time he saw the Sanctum, it was collapsing in on itself. Now, it looks completely untouched, almost better than before. Looking around, he doesn't doubt magic was involved. He can feel it, inside of him. Something in the stones resonating with something in this place. Or, maybe it's just nerves. He's never trusted magic. That irony is not lost on him now.

Strange is not surprised to see them, and that irritates him to no small degree. And having surprised Stephen Strange twice in one lifetime (or would it be considered two lifetimes now?), he accepts that that may be all he can hope for. Strange pours them both tea, and Tony unsuccessfully fights off a smirk when Steve takes a rather large sip of his and pulls the cup away from his mouth only to find that it is refilling itself. Steve does his best to look unimpressed, but from the way he fidgets with the cup, Tony can tell he's trying to figure out the mechanics of it (if there are any). Tony chooses not to question the implausible teacups (because if he has to question one thing he may as well question everything, and that is a very slippery slope down into madness). Instead, he focuses on Strange, who looks to be trying for an air of dignity that may be convincing to others, but that Tony just finds a bit of a reach if he's honest. The man wears a red cloak and a gigantic necklace, for god's sake.
Tony takes a sip of tea and makes a point of looking unimpressed when it refills itself as he sets it back in its saucer.

Strange smirks. "It's nice to see you up and about, Tony. According to the New York Times, you were in a coma for months before you were healed by a highly experimental cellular regeneration treatment. Must've been quite difficult."

"The Enquirer says you were abducted by aliens," Wong's disembodied voice says from somewhere behind a large stack of very old, dusty books.

And Tony has to smile because of course Wong reads the Enquirer. "Funny that that's probably closer to the truth," he says.

"How is your son?" Wong asks, finally materializing from behind the books.

Tony nearly chokes on his tea. "What?"

"He's not his son, he's his ward," Strange explains calmly.

"Okay, hold on. The kid- Peter is not my son," he says to Wong, "or my ward," to Strange.

"Yeah, I gotta say, I still don't understand the dynamic there," Strange says, eyes squinting.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll try to keep my relationships more suited to your understanding from now on," Tony says edgily.

Steve wisely interjects, "He's an Avenger," and Strange nods.

"Now, to what do we owe the pleasure?" he asks eventually.

Tony can't resist. "Thought you might already know, since you didn't seem surprised to see us."

"I'm many things but a mind reader is not one of them."

"No?" Tony asks innocently, and Strange smiles wryly, because it's all part of the unusual repartee that they've inexplicably developed. But when he turns to Steve to gauge his reaction, Steve is somber. So Tony just clears his throat and bites the bullet. "There's really no easy way to put this, so I'll just say it. I've been having dreams-" and that sounds wrong. "Visions?" he tries. Then shrugs. "When I'm unconscious, the infinity stones show me things. Sometimes."

Strange leans forward, and Wong edges inward from the corner of the room. "What kinds of things?" Strange asks softly, eyes burning.

Strange does not move or speak until Tony is finished. And when Tony stops talking, the silence weighs heavily in the room, quiet enough for Steve to hear every heartbeat, every sound outside on the street. It becomes nearly deafening. Then, Strange finally speaks. "This is ... unprecedented."

Tony snorts. "Yeah, no shit."

"He was right about one thing, Tony. The stones do have a mind of their own. They chose you for a reason."

"Yeah, but for what reason?" Tony asks. Steve hears the edge of frustration and desperation in his voice and hates it. At that point, Tony stands and begins pacing around the room. Strange gets up
and follows without missing a beat, so Steve and Wong do as well. Strange takes the lead and they follow him up the grand staircase and down a hallway full of magical oddities ranging from incredible to downright peculiar.

"If you really do want to know what the stones want, you could always ask," Strange says simply as they pause to examine an ancient-looking scepter ornamented at the top with an intricate starburst pattern.

Tony shakes his head. "Yeah, that sounds great, but it's a little more complicated than that. Only works when I'm unconscious, and it's only happened a few times."

"I ... may be able to help guide you partway if you like," Strange says carefully. "It's up to you, but either way, you are due for another ... checkup, if you will." The side of Strange's mouth twists up into a wry grin.

Tony eyes him warily. "As much as I hate magic, I hate not knowing even more. So ... yeah, alright what the hell. Also, and I hate my self for even having to say this sentence, but please never use checkup to describe looking at my chakras again."

Strange nods and begins speaking very quickly. "Alright, great. Just to warn you, this may be a bit uncomfortable. Have you ever astral-projected before?"

Tony's eyes narrow. "Have I ever what?" he seethes.

"I'll take that as a no. Captain Rogers, you may want to be ready to catch him." And before either Steve or Tony can respond, Strange pushes on Tony's chest...

* * *

And now he's floating above his body. Goddamnit, Strange. He fights a sudden urge to panic, but curiosity overtakes him, and he examines the scene below him. Everyone, himself included, has been slowed down to a nearly undetectable level of movement. His body is suspended mid-fall, and Steve, like the good soldier he is, has his arms out ready to catch Tony before he hits the ground. It's both charming and comforting, to know that Steve has his back. There is an amused sound below him, and he floats down a bit to see Strange looking at his astral form. "Looks like you're an old soul after all," Strange says, and sure enough, when Tony looks down at himself, he seems to be his correct age.

Tony sighs. "I hate you. You know that?"

Strange gives what he probably thinks is a droll smile. Tony just finds it obnoxious. "Should I pretend to care?" he asks dryly.

Tony doesn't even try to fight back an eye roll. "So what now, Doc? I'm pretty sure my health plan doesn't cover astral checkups."

Strange snorts, and waves his hands in a complicated pattern, muttering "reveal." Tony feels nothing, but it's the look on Strange's face that makes him look down at his astral form. He doesn't gasp but it's a near thing. His form is glowing with brightly colored currents that run in and around one another throughout his whole body. They are somehow wispy and fluid at the same time, and it's breathtaking. Judging by the way Strange is staring at him, he's not the only one who thinks so. "Did you see this last time?" he asks.

Strange cant his head noncommittally, eyes still wide. "It wasn't this spectacular last time."
"That mean what I think it means?" he asks, barely holding back a grimace.

"It's getting stronger," Strange confirms. "But it looks ... more controlled. Have you noticed any physical side-effects?"

"I'm strong. As strong as Steve, maybe even stronger. It was unpredictable and dangerous, so I learned how to control it."

"That was smart," Strange concedes. "Though I must warn you that if this power continues to grow, trying to control it may become an exercise in futility."

"Yeah. One of the many reasons I'd like some answers," Tony says pointedly, and Strange finally tears his eyes away from Tony's astral form.

Strange nods. "Of course. I will attempt to guide you into the Soul Realm, but it's going to take both of us working together to do this."

"Alright, let's just get it over with," Tony says in his own way of agreeing.

"Do you see that orange pathway?" Strange says, eyeing Tony's form. He looks down and nods, watching the stream run all the way from his chest out to his extremities. It's vaguely reminiscent of the circulatory system. Tony nods. "Focus on its central origin, and then let it flow out to your fingertips. When it reaches your fingertips, project it outside of yourself, right in front of you."

Tony shakes his head. "God, there's so many jokes I want to make right now," he mutters to himself, but instead he focuses on the glowing point of light in his chest, feels its flow out toward his hands, and pushes it outward, with a hand raised like he's about to blast something with an RT. *Damn,* he misses his suit. To his surprise, a weakly glowing orange cloud appears in front of him.

"Good!" Strange says. "Try to make it stronger."

Tony pushes harder, knowing if he were in his body he'd probably be sweating now, and the cloud glows brighter, stronger.

"Excellent. Now I'm going to form the gateway. Don't let go of it." Tony keeps pushing and the cloud begins to move, swirling around itself until it forms a large spinning circle. Through the circle, he sees the glowing world, and with a prompting nod from Strange, he steps through the portal.

* * *

"Now this is a surprise."

He starts and turns abruptly, and suddenly she is there, where before there had only been emptiness.

"I must say I did not expect to see you so soon."

He narrows his eyes. "Being dead doesn't make you all-knowing then, I take it."

She smiles, and it's still a bit disconcerting, but he can't deny he's relieved to see her. "It does not, I am afraid. My knowledge is limited to the past and present, because the future has yet to be decided. I can see the likelihood of all possible outcomes, but in the end, only the living get to decide them."

"So me finding you again wasn't high on the list of possible outcomes, then."

"No it was not," she says amusedly. "You are a rather capricious individual."
He shrugs. "I've been called worse." He looks around warily, still feeling edgy from last night.

"You seem agitated."

"Yeah, well let's just say my last encounter with someone here didn't go very well."

She nods, and he wonders if she knows. "Why are you here, Anthony?" His own name sounds nearly foreign to his ears. No one ever called him Anthony except Edwin Jarvis, or his mother when he drove her to the highest levels of exasperation.

He cant his head curiously. "Don't you know?"

"I would like to hear you say it."

Huh. "Simple: I have questions, this place has answers."

"You wish to know why the stones chose you." He nods. She smiles. "For that, you need only listen to the stones. They do speak, if you care enough to listen." She goes silent, looking up at the roiling sky above them.

- worthy ...

He jumps. "Ah, you heard something, did you not?"

"I ... don't know," he says, afraid to admit it. But he doesn't think it fools her.

"Perhaps a more practical explanation may be easier for you to accept. The Mad Titan wielded the stones against your universe. Their universe. The stones have been here since the beginning of time, and the Mad Titan's machinations were corrupt. He upset the balance, so to speak, and since then the stones have sought to put right the wrong that was done to this universe by the perverse misuse of their power."

"So they're making amends."

"Yes, to put it simply."

"There's a threat, I know that much. I know that's what they were trying to tell me in the dream. But if I'm gonna help stop it, I need details."

"Oh I am afraid I cannot help you there," she says. It has the tone of a playful reprimand. "But you and your friends are intelligent. I am sure that together you can find the threat."

He sighs but nods resignedly.

"But that is not all," she says as if reading his mind.

"I want to see her."

She smiles pityingly at him. "I am afraid it is not within my power to grant you that. As it is, you should be getting back. Captain Rogers should be catching your body right about ... now."

* * *

The sensation of being shoved unceremoniously back into his body is even more disconcerting than being removed from it. He gasps and reels, but Steve is there to catch him, looking down at him with concern. His grasp is steady, and Tony feels completely secure in his arms. "Hey, Tony."
"Hey, Steve," he replies casually, though he's breathing rather hard.

"You alright?"

He closes his eyes against the sudden wave of nausea and with Steve's help pulls himself back up into a standing position. Steve keeps a hand on his back, supporting him. "Yeah," he pants. "Just great. Let's ... let's never do that again, okay?" And at the amused looks on Strange and Wong's faces, he forces himself to breathe normally again and stand completely upright.

"What did you see?" Wong asks.

"Our mutual friend," Tony says, and Strange's eyebrows shoot up.

"The Ancient One. What did she tell you?"

"She was irritatingly cryptic, but she confirmed my hunch. The stones were trying to warn me about a threat. She didn't tell me anything concrete, but she said we'd be able to figure it out if we worked together. So, anyone got any great ideas? If I were a threat to the universe, where would I be hiding?"

Strange and Wong exchange loaded glances. "I may have an idea," Strange says slowly. He sets off at a brisk clip down the hallway and they follow behind. Abruptly, Strange stops and opens a door, which leads to a wide room with marble floors lined with different relics. In the middle of the room is a small wooden podium, upon which floats-

"Oh, you have got to be shitting me."

"Open your mind, Stark," Strange says annoyedly.

"It's a goddamn crystal ball, Strange, how the hell else am I supposed to react??"

"Perhaps you could try for a modicum of respect," Strange suggests dolefully.

"What does it do?" Steve asks diplomatically, effectively cutting off Tony's acerbic response.

"It monitors the use of magic around the world," Wong says as Strange works, and sure enough, from their position on the other side of it, the faint outlines of a globe can be seen on the surface of the sphere. "The Orb alerts us when there are instances of powerful magic and allows us to pinpoint them with a high degree of accuracy."

"The most recent threat occurred in Latveria three days ago. It's the highest level of magic we've seen since the Battle of Wakanda," Strange says. He waves a hand over the globe, spinning it around so that the side he was examining faces them now. "This is what the readings look like now." And sure enough, Latveria glows bright like a beacon amid the surrounding dark areas of the globe.

"Latveria's a bomb waiting to go off," Tony says. "Has been since the Decimation."

"It's politically unstable. There's a growing resistance movement that's spreading to neighboring countries," Steve says. He looks at Tony. "We had a close call there a few years back." Tony nods in confirmation.

"I'd say it's well worth our while to check it out, then," Strange says. "You should go. We need to stay here and guard the Sanctum. If there is a threat coming, we need to prepare."

* * *
Tony is uncharacteristically silent on the drive home. They'd pulled out one of his sports cars that was still in the garage at the compound (no one had had the heart to get rid of it), and he zips along I-87 at a dizzying speed. For a long time, Steve gets lost in the blur of the highway. Then Tony speaks up.

"We'll have to call in a few favors for this one. We need to be covert. Can't risk starting an international incident. And the team needs to be small. Just you and me, maybe one or two others."

"Agreed. I'll talk to Fury, see if he can help with travel arrangements, aliases, other stuff."

"And I'll see who else I can get. You heard from Clint?"

"Clint's on house arrest."

Tony snorts. "Alright, Lang then."

"Lang's good. Inconspicuous. What about the kid?"

"...I don't know, Steve."

"You promised you'd take him on a mission."

Tony sighs. "Alright, I'll call the kid too."

* * *

Luis is only midway through a giant stack of paperwork when the phone rings. "X-Con Security Consultants, this is Luis speaking," he answers, shuffling a large sub-stack of papers to the side as he balances the phone against his shoulder. He taps his pen idly on the desk as he listens, and then his eyes go wide. "Uh, yeah, sure man. No problem." He grabs the phone and walks quickly over to the other side of the room where Scott is dozing back in his chair, mouth wide open. "Scotty," he hisses. Scott, oblivious, continues to snore loudly. "Scotty!" Scott wakes up with a start and the chair he's propped himself up in tips back dangerously.

"Luis? What?" he says through a yawn once he's recovered his balance.

"Dude, I think I got Iron Man on the phone for you."

Scott's brow furrows. "Really?" He grabs the phone from Luis, who hovers eagerly near his desk, straining to hear what is being said on the other end of the phone. "Hello? Oh, hey, man...

"... Uh, not at the moment, no ...

"Oh, okay, yeah, let me check my ... calendar ..." Scott shuffles a few papers loudly on his desk. He doesn't have a calendar.

"... Yeah that should be fine ... Alright, see you then." And Scott hangs up the phone. He looks up at Luis, who is practically vibrating with anticipation.

"What'd he say, Scotty?"

Scott's eyes are wide, and slowly a smile stretches across his face. "I'm going on a mission," he says, hardly able to contain his excitement.

Luis takes a second to absorb the information, then he pumps his fist and lets out a loud whoop. "Yeah! That's right, bro! That's right! That's what I'm talkin' about!" He and Scott do an intricate
handshake/fist-bump combination. From the complexity and speed of it, it is likely very heavily rehearsed.

* * *

May does not get much free time nowadays, what with constant meetings and fundraisers and office work and publicizing events. It can all get overwhelming, especially when she's got ten different volunteers and business executives who require her attention at any given moment, but if anyone asked she would always say it was worth it. Because it is. If she can help one family, one individual, then it will all have been worth it. Homeless Support is her second-proudest achievement. The first is currently hanging upside-down from the ceiling in his room, trying to throw and catch grapes in his mouth as the blood slowly rushes to his head, likely killing his last-remaining brain cells.

The phone rings, and she answers though she doesn't recognize the number. She always answers unknown numbers nowadays, since she's given her number out to so many people in case they're ever in need of help or shelter.

"Hello? This is May Parker."

"Hello, dear. How are you this evening?"

May gasps, because she recognizes that voice. He'd loved her walnut date loaf. He'd been the biggest thing in her nephew's life, had helped him become who he is today, and then he'd died. And two weeks ago, he'd come back. Looking back at Peter's room, she sees that he's thoroughly distracted. "Oh my god," she whispers.

"Just Tony is fine," he replies easily. "You know I've been reading up on the Homeless Support Project. Gotta say, you're an inspiration."

She blushes, glad it's not a video call. "Well, I don't know about-"

"And there she goes with the modesty, my god May Parker, you are an angel. Anyway, I love what I'm seeing here, and you can count on Stark Industries as a partner in this. We can meet later to go over all the details, but the company would love to contribute."

"That's ... very generous, thank you Tony."

"Least I can do," he says. And then after a beat, "You're probably wondering why I called."

"I am a little bit," she admits.

"I can't go into much detail, but something's gonna happen, and I need his help. It's just a simple reconnaissance mission. He should be back by Monday, maybe even sooner." The words are hasty and his tone is placating, as if he expects her to be upset, to say no right on the spot before he can even get it all out.

May hazards another glance back at Peter's room. He's currently pacing back and forth on the ceiling. "Gotta say, I'm surprised you're asking my permission," she admits. Her tone isn't hostile, just honest.

He sighs and is silent for a few breaths. She pictures him placing a hand over his mouth, fingers spread out over his lips and thumb braced against his jaw, elbow propped up on something, because it's just something she's always seen him do, first on television, and then in person when they'd met. "I didn't mean for him to be aboard that ship, May. I tried to send him home. I didn't want him involved." It's the closest to imperfect she's ever heard him sound. A crack in the facade. Her
nephew, the pressure point.

"I'm not upset," she says quickly. "I'm not angry. I don't blame you. God, how could I? You saved the universe, you saved my nephew, you helped him become who he is today. I can't be mad at you for that."

He huffs, a little relieved unless she's just imagining it. "You probably should be," he says softly.

She finds herself smiling. "Well I'm not. I'm grateful. I would've liked to be let in the loop a little sooner, but who am I kidding? He's growing up. He's practically an adult now, and I can't make his decisions for him anymore. This ... is something I have no experience with, but you do. You can help guide him to where he needs to go now. And I trust you."

He clears his throat and his voice sounds tight when he finally responds. "Thank you. We'll keep you in the loop as much as we can from now on."

"I appreciate that. It's good to have you back, Tony."

"It's good to be back, May."

At that moment, Peter materializes in the kitchen. Or rather, above it. "Peter, I've talked to you about walking on ceiling, take your shoes off first! How am I supposed to explain footprints on the ceiling to the landlord?"

Peter flips off the ceiling and lands effortlessly in a crouch on the kitchen floor. "Sorry, May!" he calls as he straightens up and walks to the refrigerator.

Tony chuckles over the phone. "Mind if I talk to him?"

"Not at all. Peter, phone's for you!"

His eyes widen and he puts back the jug of milk that he'd just grabbed out of the refrigerator. God, she hopes he was going to use a glass. She's caught him drinking straight out of the jug before. "Really?" Wordlessly, she hands him the phone with a smile. "Hello?" His eyes go wide and then a smile breaks out across his face. There are very few people in Peter's life who have ever been able to make him smile like that. Tony Stark is special. "Hey, Tony, pretty good ...

"Yeah, I know she's great right? ...

"Oh, hey, that's awesome, thank you ... 

"Yeah, that'll be a big help, I know it ...

"Right, yeah ...

"Oh, woah, uh, yeah! Yeah, that's, that sounds awesome. No I'm not busy ...

"Alright, cool ...

"Yeah, see you then." He hangs up the phone and looks back at her with a smile.

She can't help it. She smiles back. "Team-up?" she asks.

"Team-up," he confirms, eyes bright with excitement. "Oh, god what do I pack, May? What do superheroes pack for missions?" He sprints to his bedroom and the ensuing bangs and thumps she hears as he upends his closet make her wince.
"Pack several pairs of underwear!" she calls. "You never know."

"Oh god May stop," the muffled voice pleads. He appears back in the doorway.

"Is Happy picking you up?" she asks innocently.

"... Yeah, he is ... Please just don't make it weird," he mumbles.

"I won't make it weird. Peter, when have I ever made it weird."

"It's weird right now," he says in dismay, retreating back into the safety of his black hole of a room.

May waits a beat. "I won't make it weird!" she calls after him.

* * *

When Tony finally hangs up the phone, he looks haggard. His eyes are pinched around the edges, and Steve can see the pain etched in every hard line of his tense body. Steve watches him pull a hand through his hair, yanking a bit harder than normal in an effort to relieve tension. "You alright?" Steve asks quietly. He's noticed the stiffness in Tony's shoulders all day, the tight lines of discomfort along his mouth and eyes.

Tony closes his eyes and shakes his head. "I can't shake that feeling, Steve. When he grabbed me. I can still feel it." He presses his fingers into his eye sockets. "God, it feels like my head's gonna explode," he mutters. And it's so out of character for him to admit something like this. To allow himself a moment of weakness. Steve hardly knows what to do with it for a second.

Then, tentatively, Steve reaches out and places a hand against the back of Tony's exposed neck. Even just cupping it gently, he feels the tension there. Tony flinches slightly, but he doesn't pull away. And when Steve starts rubbing the back of Tony's neck with his thumb, Tony sighs quietly, head dipping further down to give Steve easier access. Encouraged, Steve keeps going, massaging the area until he feels some of the tension let up.

They don't speak, because this new thing between them is delicate, and speaking about it would make it too real too fast, and the thought of it going away is terrifying to Steve. But last night he'd gone further than he's dared to before. He'd grabbed Tony's face in his hands, brushed away his tears because he couldn't help it, damnit. No one should have to suffer alone. And Tony hadn't panicked, hadn't kicked Steve out of the room. So for now, the unspoken thing works. For now, they don't need words.

He lays back against the couch and gently pulls Tony with him so he's laying on his side between Steve and the back of the couch, head pillowed against Steve's shoulder. Shockingly, he offers no protest, just nuzzles into Steve's shoulder with a huff. Steve can practically feel the exhaustion rolling off of him in waves, and one look at Tony's heavy-lidded eyes tells him he's probably too far-gone to care, so he runs a hand through Tony's hair, nails scratching soothingly at his scalp, and Tony sighs at the relief, eyes barely staying open. Steve keeps it up as Tony grows heavier and looser against him, and once he is sure Tony is asleep, he allows himself to drift off too, enjoying the comfortable feeling of warmth and safety that lying next to Tony always brings.
Tony throws up a bare bones map of Europe over the conference room table. One small country glows blue, nearly swallowed up by the rest of the map. "Okay, so this is Latveria right here." He pinches his thumb and index finger and then brings them apart, and the map zooms in until only Latveria and the surrounding nations are visible. "Closest neighboring countries are Hungary, Serbia, Romania." Scott and Peter both nod, a little wide-eyed but at full attention.

"The United States has strong diplomatic relations with Romania at the moment, and Romania has stayed out of the Latverian Freedom Movement for the most part, so the Romania-Latveria border will be our easiest point of entry," Steve says.

"Romania is still a card-carrying member of the EU, but Latveria pulled out in 2021 when the Latverian Freedom Movement finally gained full control of the government. Two years in, and they've already made some major changes. Exports stopped entirely and imports were reduced to the bare necessities, goodwill programs like the Latverian Disaster Relief Administration and the International Literacy Foundation were scrapped," Tony counts off each offense loosely on his fingers. "Basically they severed all ties to the outside world. So, that means economic relations and international involvement are nearly nonexistent," Tony says.

"They used to have an open border, but Latveria's been busy in the past few years. They started construction on a border wall shortly after the LFM took over, and the spots that aren't finished yet are heavily patrolled," Steve says as Tony pulls up a satellite image of the Latverian border wall.

"And that's a lot of money for a country that just cut its GDP in half," Tony adds, still fiddling with the holographic image. "We're talking billions for construction and millions every year for upkeep. That's not sustainable under their current economic model, unless ... there's some secret back-room wheeling and dealing that nobody knows about."

"You mean like illegal trade or something?" Peter asks, brow furrowed.

Tony beams. "Exactly. Steve and I had a run-in with the freedom fighters back in 2020. They were using weapons modified from alien tech. Sound familiar, kid?" Peter's face goes a little red but he nods. "The tech was rough and sloppy, but let me tell ya, those motherf-" at the look on Steve's face, Tony rephrases. "Those things packed a punch. I'm telling you this from experience. And with other countries getting involved in the freedom movement, the word about those weapons must've spread like wildfire. It's illegal to modify, buy, or sell alien tech in most countries, but," Tony shrugs, "where there's a will there's a way."

"So they've been selling alien weapons to finance their security upgrades," Scott says.

"We can't be sure, but that is what it looks like. It's a huge black market industry right now. S.H.I.E.L.D. used to heavily monitor it, and they kept things under control for awhile. But S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't really exist anymore, so there's no one to keep it in check now."

"So why get involved now?" Scott asks. A fair question. They'd stayed mostly out of the Latveria debacle for years.

Tony and Steve share a glance. "Apparently our good friend Stephen Strange has been staring into
his crystal ball, monitoring magical activity around the world. Latveria's levels are off the charts."

"But ... Chitauri tech isn't magic-based, right? It's just ... super advanced tech," Peter says slowly.

Tony points at Peter emphatically. He's pacing back and forth in front of the conference table now, giving off that frenetic kind of energy he manufactures when he's deep into a discussion. "You're on a roll, kid. Chitauri tech is just that: it's tech. Nothing magical about it. So that means, something else is going on there. We've got a hostile nation that's presumably been manufacturing advanced weapons for years, and now they're putting out a shit-ton of magic energy? Not good. Hence the need for recon."

"Makes sense," Scott says, and Steve thinks he means it this time. "Why us, though? I mean, no offense Spider-Man you're awesome. And hey, I'm just honored to be here, but, wasn't Clint like ... an actual spy or something?"

"Clint Barton has other obligations," Steve says. "Scott, you used to make a living as a burglar, and your suit makes it easy for you to get in and out of places undetected." Steve looks at Peter. "Kid, you're strong and light on your feet. All in all, I think you two were the right choice."

Scott smiles. "Awesome."

Peter also looks pleased. "So, uh, what are we looking for? Once we get there."

"Excellent segue into our next topic," Tony says. He waves his hand and brings up an image of a pale man with a broad nose and high cheek bones. The man has short brown hair and a well-manicured beard. He looks completely ordinary, like one of a million among the masses you would pass in the street.

"This is Victor Von Doom. Ridiculous name I know, but don't underestimate this guy. He was a top engineer in Latveria, specialized in weapons technology. He came from money, and he has lots of political connections. Some say he was the one that got the Latverian Freedom Movement off the ground. We don't know that for sure, but what we do know is he's now the official leader of the LFM and has declared himself the Prime Minister of Latveria, although the UN has refused to recognize him as such. Anyway, Von Doom's base of operations is Hassenstadt, the capital, which he renamed Doomstadt after himself. By the way, total douche move," Tony adds, to which Peter and Scott nod judiciously in agreement. "And Doomstadt just happens to be the epicenter of all of this magical activity. So that's where we're going. You guys up for it?" Peter and Scott nod again.

"Great. I'll let Cap explain how this is all gonna go down."

Tony finally harnesses his energy enough to sit down and Steve clears his throat with intent. "This is a really simple recon op. Get in, take a look around, and then get out. The border is fortified, but there are some soft spots that are still under construction, like we said. That'll be how we slip in unnoticed. Scott, you'll shrink down and get past the guards, then cause a distraction so the rest of us can slip in. From there, it's about 45 minutes on foot until we get to Doomstadt. All the satellite images we have tell us there's two points of interest in the city: One is the LFM's base of operations, and the other is a large, unmarked facility on the southeastern side. There's a lot of activity going in and out of there, and we're assuming that that's where the weapons are being manufactured. Kid, you'll go with Tony to the military base, and Lang, you'll come with me to that facility. If anything goes wrong, we'll reconvene at the entry point outside the wall. Got it?"

* * *

Scott watches the blurred landscape below them in obvious delight. Below the quinjet, the trees and surrounding scenery bleed together like the strokes of a painter's brush, and the midday horizon takes
on a distinctly impressionistic quality. "This is so awesome. Oh man this is gonna ruin regular planes for me now." He looks at Peter for confirmation and at Peter's excited smile, he lets out a laugh. "Awesome," he mutters again to himself.

Tony's head is turned slightly away as he checks one of the readouts on the control panel, but Steve catches the hint of a smirk at the corner of his mouth. "It's the only way to travel," Steve says softly, just for Tony, just to see his expression. Tony suddenly becomes very interested in a bit of dust on the steering column that requires him to turn his head exactly far enough to be out of Steve's line of sight, but Steve can tell by way his eyes crinkle at the corners that he's smiling.

Steve is wearing the old stealth suit. When he'd walked out to the quinjet wearing it, Tony had ceased mid-conversation with Peter and stared with comically wide eyes at Steve. Peter had looked between them confusedly, and Tony had looked like he'd had to physically shake himself out of his stupor. "Didn't know you kept that thing," he'd said eventually, managing to sound casual. Steve had smiled. "It has its uses."

The effect the stealth suit had had on Tony was unexpected. Steve toys with it for a bit, musing indulgently on what it had meant. In all likelihood, Tony had simply been surprised to see the old suit. So, yeah. That's all it was.

When they begin to pass over the Atlantic Ocean, Tony puts the quinjet on autopilot and leaves the cockpit. Steve walks back to join him in the cabin, because he's put in enough time with Tony in his workshop to know what's about to happen now. Tony pulls out a large briefcase from underneath one of the unoccupied seats. "Hey kid, got somethin' for ya," he says, passing the briefcase to Peter. "Open it up." He crosses his arms and rests a hand on his chin, purposefully nonchalant, but Steve doesn't miss the grin tugging at one corner of his mouth.

Peter clicks open the latches and carefully lifts the lid of the case. And Steve is struck with the immediate image of a kid on Christmas morning. "Woahh. Is this-

"A stealth suit," Tony confirms casually, but the corner of his mouth is definitely turned upwards now. Tony loves giving gifts. Especially when he makes them himself.

"Oh my god," Peter whispers, pulling the suit out. It's not a nanotech suit like the most recent one Tony had made for Peter. It's a lighter, stretchy material similar to the first suit Tony had made him, but it's thicker (kevlar-reinforced fabric) and it's completely black except for the stunningly white eyes, with a subtle webbed pattern that flows elegantly down the arms and legs and shimmers when it catches the light.

"It's not nanotech, but it's light, quick, breathable. Bullet-proof, too. There's also an array of stealth features programmed into it," Tony says with a casual lilt to his voice, as if bored with it. Like he's fooling anyone. "You can play around a little bit with those, but don't blow up the ship."

Peter continues to stare at the suit, rubbing a finger over the material in wonder. "You made this just for this mission?" he asks.

"Well, no. Been working on it. Avengers work isn't all punching bad guys and blowing stuff up, you know. Sometimes we need to keep a low profile."

Peter nods, and Steve doesn't miss the way his eyes shine when Tony says 'Avengers work'. Tony's greatest gift to Peter had always been making him an Avenger. "Thanks, Tony. This is ... wow this is so cool."

Tony shrugs modestly, because somehow the gratitude part is always the part that gets him. "Wanna
try it on?” he asks.

Peter gets an excited glint in his eyes. "Can I?" he asks.

"Uh, yeah you can. Why do you think I made it?" He shoos Peter off. "Go, try it on already."

"You did good, Tony," Steve says when Peter disappears into the back. Tony is silent, but there's a gentleness in his eyes that makes Steve's heart melt just a little.

"Awesome," Scott agrees with an amused shake of his head.

* * *

Steve and Tony return to the cockpit for the remaining hour and a half of the flight when they cross over into Europe. Mostly, they just sit in silence while Scott and Peter exchange the occasional bit of conversation in the back. Tony lets Steve have the controls for a bit, since Steve has never actually flown the quinjet. He has never been very fond of piloting since his plunge into the ice, but with Tony right there giving quiet direction, he feels inexplicably calm about it.

* * *

When they touch down in Romania, Steve turns to Tony with a questioning look. "You gonna suit up?"

Tony grins wickedly. "Thought you'd never ask, Cap." He taps the arc reactor twice with his fingertips and then pushes outwards with them. The nanoparticles come flooding out at a rapid speed, slowly making their way around his whole body, forming the new suit.

Everyone stares with wide eyes. It's breathtaking.

"Shit," Steve breathes, feeling like the breath has been punched out of him.

Steve catches Tony's smile right before the visor flips over his face. "Language," he chides in that familiar, slightly robotic voice, filtered through the helmet of the suit.

Steve huffs a laugh of disbelief, still unable to look away from the suit. It's sleek, almost fluid-like in the way it wraps around Tony's body, tight to his skin and the curves of his muscles. It's also black, like the Spider-Man suit, except the faceplate and some of the lines along the arms and thighs are silver. The arc reactor and the eyes glow blue, as well as nodes along his hips and abdomen. Branching out from the reactor is a honeycomb pattern that glows bright blue around the reactor and as it moves away from that central point, dims to a less obtrusive shimmer that is only visible when it catches the light. The honeycomb pattern covers the entire glossy finish of the suit, Steve realizes in awe.

"Gotta say, guys, I feel a little underdressed now," Scott says with a grin, spreading his arms wide and sparing Steve his last bit of dignity so he can recover. Scott is wearing his traditional black and red suit, helmet dangling loosely from one hand.

The helmet of the Iron Man suit recedes down into the armor and Tony gives him a winning smile before walking down the exit ramp of the ship. "Sorry, Lang. On Wednesdays we wear stealth."

* * *

Lang's idea of a distraction ends up being shrinking to a near-invisible size and yelling in the border guard's ear, then flying away on an ant and making her give chase to an invisible foe. Tony, Steve
and Peter duck through the scaffolding of the unfinished border wall and begin making their way to Doomstadt.

They don't realize Scott has returned until he says something in Tony's ear from the vicinity of Tony's left shoulder and Tony gives a full-body flinch. "Jesus, Tinkerbell, I have a heart condition!" Tony mutters, grabbing his chest.

"Oh, sorry man! I forgot you have the thing again." Scott returns to normal size and walks alongside of them.

"It's alright, Scott, Tony's just being dramatic," Steve says. Tony huffs indignantly and Peter snorts.

Tony turns to Peter in mock offense. "Really, you too? Traitor." The lenses of the spidey mask dilate comically.

Peter hangs his head slightly. "Sorry," he mumbles, sufficiently chided, but Steve can tell he's smiling through the mask.

* * *

The sun hangs low in the horizon by the time they reach Doomstadt. The city is elevated above the surrounding landscape, mostly cold concrete structures punctuated here and there with older architecture. Like many European cities, Doomstadt is a mix of the old and the new. The military base is the largest structure in the city, and it juts obtrusively from the western hillside, all hard lines and sharp angles. The facility on the southeastern side is surrounded by tall chain-link fences hedged with barbed wire.

Tony hands a pair of tinted lenses to Steve that he's materialized from somewhere, and Steve recognizes them as the same pair that Tony usually wears. "These'll help you scan for intruders. They can also analyze energy readings and the composition of most objects, so if you run into any alien weapons, they'll come in handy."

Steve nods and accepts the glasses. He tries them on experimentally, looking Tony up and down and watching the readings play out in front of his eyes. "Whaddaya think?" Steve asks with a smirk.

"Hmm, I think they look better on me. You're more of an aviators man," Tony muses. His eyes twinkle playfully up at Steve, and Steve rolls his eyes, telling himself resolutely that he doesn't care about the fact that Tony likes him in aviators.

"Alright, time to split up. Kid, you ready?" Tony says after a moment, bringing the helmet up to form around his head again. Peter nods and steps up to Tony. "Alright, Titanic style, remember?" Tony says, and Peter steps in front of him, raising his arms out slightly. Tony grabs him under the arms and lifts off. Peter lets out a strangled squeal at the abrupt take-off, and soon they're just a blip in the sky. The suit is very quiet in flight, Steve notices, impressed.

Next to him, Scott shields his eyes from the setting sun to squint at the large facility in the distance. Way in the distance. "We didn't think this part through, did we?" he says quietly. Following Scott's line of sight and seeing how far away the facility is, Steve realizes what he's talking about.

Steve sighs, mentally preparing himself for lots of running. "Not really," he mutters and takes off toward the southeast part of the city.

* * *

Peter looks a little exhilarated and a little sick when Tony finally sets them down in a quiet part of the
forest behind the military base. "You alright?" Tony asks, letting the helmet dissolve away so the kid can see his face. "If you're gonna hurl, take the mask off first. I've made that mistake before," he says, cringing a bit.

Peter shakes his head, the eyes of the suit contracting slightly. The expressive eyes had been one of Tony's proudest achievements with the Spider-Man suits. They allow some of Peter's personality to shine through, while still protecting his identity. "Nah. I'm okay," the kid pants. "That was some ride." His voice cracks a little as he breathes deeply, and Tony smirks.

The military base is largely unoccupied except for the nighttime guards. They sneak around the back and Tony flies up to a second-floor window (tactically less likely to be protected) and Peter climbs up the wall beside him. Tony cuts a small hole in the window with a laser from the top of his gauntlet and Peter reaches through to unlock and open the window. Peter fits in easily, his body sliding through with startling fluidity, but the suit is too bulky and Tony has to grab the top of the window and hang there as the suit retreats back into the reactor so he can swing through the window and into the room.

"That was pretty cool," Peter muses when Tony lands in a crouch on the floor next to him.

Tony stands and dusts off his hands. "Alright now let's find something for me to hack."

They make their way carefully down the hallway of the building, sticking close to the walls as a precaution. Peter blinds any security cameras they come across with his webbing. Eventually they find what looks to be the command center, and Tony hacks into the security panel on the door, gaining them quick access to the room.

"Alright, kid, you keep watch," Tony says quietly as he slips a small implement out of the pocket of his black tactical pants and plugs it into the USB of one of the computers. Peter guards the door as Tony accesses the terminal and taps away at the keyboard, wincing at how loud the sound is in the quiet room. One of the many reasons he prefers projection keyboards, he thinks wistfully.

After getting through a layer of high-end firewall protection, he accesses the files. As they begin to download, he quickly scans some of them. A multitude of payroll documents and inter-departmental memos flit before his eyes, and then- "Shit."

***

At a brisk clip, Steve can run between 40-50 miles an hour. He's breathing hard, tearing up the distance, coming up fast on the facility. "You there, Lang?" he calls, just to make sure Scott hasn't gotten blown away with the breeze on that ant. Somehow, having seen the Asgardians in battle, riding a flying horse suddenly wasn't that inconceivable. But, riding a flying ant? Come on.

"Yeah, we're here Cap! Ant-o-ine"t isn't quite as fast as you, but I think she likes the challenge."

When they make it to the facility, the sun has fully set. The only light comes from a lone streetlight on the corner and the eerie green-yellow glow of fluorescents inside of the facility. Scott flies Ant-o-ine"t between the chain links of the fence and opens the gate for Steve.

Getting into the facility is easy from there. It seems the Latverians had considered the razor wire fence to be their primary deterrent against incursions and had not thought much about security past that.

Past a couple of side rooms, the primary area in the facility is an open-plan factory that spreads out shockingly far on all sides. The machinery is quiet and the workers have all gone home, but at the
end of each of the many assembly stations lies a pile of weapons, each different, each worrying alien in appearance. "Okay, yeah," Scott breathes. "These are definitely alien weapons."

Cautiously, Steve walks up to the nearest assembly station, pulling out Tony's glasses from a storage compartment in his belt. He slides them on and directs his gaze at the weapons, watching as the scanners analyze and display the data- "Shit."

* * *

"Hey Steve, you copy?" Tony's quiet voice over the comms startles Steve and Scott out of their mutual shock.

"Yeah, Tony we got a situation here."

"Yeah, so do we. This is not good."

Tony, somebody's coming. It's Peter's voice, muted but audible through Tony's open comms channel.

"Steve, we gotta bounce. Meet you at the rendezvous point." The channel goes dead with a click, and Steve grimaces at the sight before him as he continues sweeping the factory.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y., you takin' pictures of all this?"

"Yes, Captain Rogers."

* * *

They pay in cash for two rooms under a fake name in the cheapest Romanian motel they can find. It's the kind of place suited to a certain clientele, which means that the management leaves them alone and asks no questions. Still, just to be safe, Scott had gone in to pay for the rooms. No one knows who Ant-Man is under the mask, but everyone knows Steve Rogers, and everyone knows Tony Stark. They sit in Steve and Scott's room to regroup, and Tony pulls up several of the files that he'd stolen. He plugs the USB implement into the side of something on his wrist that Steve had thought was a watch, and he should really know by now not to underestimate Tony's accessories.

The watch lights up and projects several files that Tony had stolen. "This is what we got from the military base. Had to sort through a lot of boilerplate and codes hidden within codes, but it looks like the LFM is a lot bigger than we thought." Tony swipes his hand and pulls up a map of Africa with three countries highlighted in red. "They have forces mobilized in Nigeria, Burunda, and Niger, and I'm not trying to sound paranoid here, but do you know what those three countries all have in common?"

"They share a border with Wakanda," Steve says. The nagging sense of unease he'd felt when scanning those weapons has grown exponentially. "Tony, those weapons they're building ... F.R.I.D.A.Y. ran a compositional analysis and they're made with a combination of Chitauri tech and vibranium." Tony flicks on the holographic feature of his glasses, and the pictures F.R.I.D.A.Y. had taken in the factory appear before their eyes.

After the images have played through, Tony takes off the glasses and passes a hand over his face with a sigh. "Damn, this is bigger than we thought."

"You think they're stealing vibranium from Wakanda?" Scott asks. Peter sits on one of the beds next to him, watching the entire exchange with wide eyes.

Tony chuckles humorlessly. "You don't steal vibranium from Wakanda and expect to walk away
with your life. There's more to this." His eyes go a bit distant, and he winces just a bit. "I'm going to have a very awkward call to make tomorrow."

"But for now, let's all just try to get some sleep," Steve says judiciously.

* * *
Scott conks out right away, which Steve envies. Tony and Peter stay up for awhile longer, and Steve listens to their muffled voices on the other side of the wall until they drop away into nothing. He spends the better part of an hour trying to force his mind to shut down, to accept sleep, but he's on edge and Scott's loud snoring from the other bed isn't helping. Eventually, he gives up, hauling himself out of the bed with a frustrated sigh.

He finds himself outside, looking out over the railing at the empty parking lot. One look up gives him a much more pleasant view, and he finds himself standing up on the railing to haul himself onto the flat rooftop of the motel. From there, the sky opens up and he gets lost in the stars for a moment until a soft sigh tells him he's not the only one battling insomnia tonight.

He settles himself down next to Tony, who hardly reacts. His face is tipped up to the stars. "Why am I not surprised to find you up here," Steve muses aloud.

"You tend to seek out higher ground when you need to clear your head," Steve supplies easily.

"Huh. Nebula said kind of the same thing."

"She's a smart lady," Steve says.

"Yeah, she is."

"You miss her?"

Tony snorts softly. "A little bit, yeah." He looks at Steve, nose wrinkling playfully. "It's a little weird, right?"

"No," Steve says sincerely. "It's not. You two went through a lot together. When you stare death in the face alongside someone else, it forms a bond." He thinks about the Commandos. Some part of him still aches for his old friends sometimes.

Tony sighs, looking contemplatively at the stars again. "The thing about it, Steve, was that it was so beautiful. Space. I would stare out at it, and think about how I'd never seen something so incredible in my life, and I knew it would be the thing that killed me." The last words are so quiet, and Tony looks so small suddenly, drowning in the light of a billion stars.

"But then it didn't," Steve says, a little too adamantly, feeling a little too desperate about it, and he hates how he almost chokes on the words.

Tony laughs. "Yeah. It didn't." It's warm and steady despite everything and Steve realizes with utter relief that he can see just how much Tony has healed from that. From all of it. And he thinks they've healed too, he and Tony, in the collective sense. He feels the new closeness between them, is constantly aware of it. It's new and just a bit terrifying, but it's just what he's needed. It fills some of the broken spaces within him, threatening to make him whole again.

Steve searches for something lighter now. "You know, I think you made that kid's week asking him
"I think we made Lang's week too," Tony says, which makes them both chuckle. When Tony laughs, the heavens open up. It's such a beautiful thing that Steve hardly feels worthy to witness it. They're sitting on the roof of a shitty motel in the worst part of a city Steve's never heard of before, but Tony is beautiful. The cold, hard gravel is biting into Steve's ass as he sits, and the chilling night air is slowly sucking the warmth out of his limbs, but Tony's eyes crinkle when he smiles. Behind them, the neon sign blinks and buzzes, flickering in and out, giving away exactly the kind of establishment it's advertising. But Tony is here, next to him, and so everything seems a little brighter, a little better. Steve's entire world is narrowed down to him in this one moment, and all he wants to do is ... well, that's the thing, isn't it? Steve doesn't know what he wants to do. Doesn't want to think too hard about what he can never have. So he just sits and lets the moment be the way it will be.

For awhile they just sit, shoulders just barely touching, faces lifted up in silent communion with the universe, enjoying infinity in all its glory. "You know," Tony says eventually, edging a bit closer to Steve to feed off of his warmth. "It's been nice to get out of the house, but I think I'm ready to be home."

"Me too."

* * *

Tony is more awake than Steve in the morning, despite the conspicuous absence of coffee. Steve wonders if it's the added years, the added power, or just the invigorating youthfulness of Peter Parker, who is a quiet, adoring presence at Tony's side as they pack and trade light remarks back and forth. Peter is special. Tony had seen it before anyone else, and now Steve sees it. He has an effervescence that is a boon to those around him and an enthusiasm that is contagious. He is far kinder and more optimistic than someone who has seen the things he's seen should be. It's downright improbable that a kid who's gone through as much as Peter at such a young age could remain unspoiled by it. And yet, living proof. Right there in front of Steve's eyes.

On the flight home, Tony blares "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution" among others, and sings loudly, which makes everyone chuckle and then join in. Because no matter what is going on around them, the quinjet is a world in itself. And in this world, there is only screaming music and loud singing and messing up the lyrics and laughter and the team.

Tony also gives Peter a turn at the controls and teaches him the bare basics of piloting. "This is just a crash course," Tony prefaces, and then after he chews on the words a bit, "well ... maybe 'crash course' isn't the right way to describe it ..." Steve chuckles and Tony cuts him a glare that has absolutely no heat and he knows it.

"Isn't this crazy kid, you're gonna learn how to fly before you learn how to drive," Tony muses quietly as Peter carefully steers.

"I know how to drive," Peter says defensively, eyes focused out front, not daring to turn his head.

"No you don't."

"Yeah I do!" At Tony's emphatic silence, he says a bit more honestly, "I've ... driven before. Once."

"Driving's an important skill. Everyone should learn how to drive."

"Yeah, well May never learned, so."
"So I'll teach you," Tony finishes effortlessly with a flourish of his hand, as if that was exactly where Peter had been going with that sentence.

Something flashes in Peter's eyes. "You ... wanna teach me how to drive?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah sure." Tony shrugs. "We can practice in the Audi."

"Audis are great cars!" Scott calls from the cabin.

* * *

He roars down the Van Wyck like a madman, and he knows it, and Peter knows it too, because when they first left the compound, Tony had been afraid he would break something with his white-knuckle grip on the door handle. But after a few minutes, he'd eased off, relaxed his shoulders, and they'd settled into conversation. Because Peter trusts Tony, and that is something Tony will always be infinitely undeserving of and infinitely grateful for.

"So, first official Avengers stealth op. What did you think?" He spares a glance at Peter through the edge of his sunglasses.

"It was great!" The endless optimism hits him right in the chest. It's so incredibly, disgustingly endearing, damnit. "The new stealth suit is so awesome. And oh my god, your new nano suit-"

Tony's fighting hard against the smile, but it's starting to show. "Not bad, right? We did look pretty awesome."

"Do you think ... maybe, I dunno, maybe we could ... do it again sometime?"

He blinks for a moment as it sets in. The kid wants to do this again. Wants to be a part of the team. "Definitely. Absolutely. Remember though, school and family comes first. It's your senior year, you need to work hard, put in the effort. Help your aunt with Homeless Support. Be there for her. Then, your patrols. Can't forget about watching out for the little guy. And then, if you've got a little extra time..." he trails off with a shrug.

"Right, yeah, of course. But, like, if I do have extra time ..."

Tony smiles. "Avengers stuff."

* * *

Peter freezes on the sidewalk in front of the door to his apartment building. "Uh, Tony. It's Saturday night..."

Tony pats him on the back. "Don't worry, kid, I texted Hap, told him to beat it."

Peter nearly goes limp with full-body relief. "Oh, thank god. Thank you, thank you."

Tony escorts him up the stairs with a hand on his shoulder. "No problem. But you know you're gonna have to talk to them at some point about this, right? I mean, I'll admit communication isn't my strong suit, but, come on. If I'm telling you you need to have a talk, then you need to have a talk."

"I know, I know."

When May answers the door and sees Tony standing right behind Peter, she yelps in surprise. Both Peter and Tony flinch, but Tony chuckles when May grabs him by the shoulders and pulls him into a hug. She steps back, looking at him critically. "Oh my god, you look ..." She doesn't finish, but
stares at him like she's not sure how to reconcile his appearance.

He shrugs. "Would you believe cellular regeneration?" he tries, cursing the stupid cover story but knowing he's got nothing better to offer besides the truth, which is just ... well.

May gives him a critical look, but she's undoubtedly seen the same story playing out on the news. His face is on every channel, every newspaper, everything. "I know you would like me to believe that," she concludes, and to her immense credit she doesn't say anything more on the subject, just ushers them inside and makes her way into the kitchen.

Tony shoves his hands in his pockets and glances around the apartment appreciatively, meandering a bit to take in sundry items of interest. "So, this is the new place," he says. "Love it. May, you've done a great job. Love the decor."

May is in the kitchen, pouring two glasses of lemonade. "Thank you!" she says a little abstractedly. "Ms. Potts was so sweet to help us find this place."

Tony shakes his head. "No I didn't," he says thoughtfully, eyes sweeping around the apartment again. It's bigger than the Parkers' last one. More open, in a better part of town. And the view out of the living room window is ... an actual view.

"They helped us a lot, Ms. Potts and Happy. When we came back, our apartment had been sold. All our stuff was ... gone. Ms. Potts helped set us up here. And she helped us with rent for awhile there until May found a job."

* * *

Pepper, you sneaky, kind, generous, brilliant - He nods, and Peter seems to accept it.

* * *

By the time they finish giving him the tour, Tony has finished his glass of lemonade, and regretfully, he says that he has to leave. Peter wishes he would stay for dinner, but god he wouldn't admit that out loud. Too embarrassing. Tony smiles charmingly at May before he walks out the door. "May, you were a perfect hostess as always. We'll do this again." Then he claps Peter on the shoulder. "I gotta go make a call," he says quietly. "You take care. Call me if you need me. And stay out of trouble. You are only allowed to get in trouble when I'm around," he calls over his shoulder as he goes.

"Damn straight," May says from the kitchen. Peter blushes. Tony smiles. And then, Tony's gone.

Peter stands there for a minute after he's left before closing the door. When he turns around, May is grinning expectantly. "So ... how was the mission?"

Peter smiles back, because it's May, and May always had the ability to pull some leftover happiness out of him from somewhere. "It was awesome, May."

* * *

When Tony gets back, Steve is there, oh god, and it's so incredibly comforting it takes him aback for a moment. "Honey, I'm home," he calls and Steve snorts.

"Good, I made dinner." And that makes Tony laugh because of course he did. Steve Rogers, the homemaker.
"Aww, isn't he sweet. Miss me, handsome?" he grins playfully and Steve's hands still over the cutting board for a millisecond, just an infinitesimal glitch, before he resumes chopping tomatoes for the salad. "Like a headache," Steve says, and Tony laughs again. Steve's face is just a little red, just a hint at the tops of his cheeks, and Tony leans against the counter feeling very satisfied with himself. With his new lightning-quick reflexes, he grabs a halved grape tomato and slips it into his mouth before Steve can stop him. He grins wickedly, and Steve gives an approximate 2% effort at looking indignant.

"Good trip?" Steve asks as he lays out the plates.

"Yep," Tony says grinning even bigger. "Ditched the car at SI, flew home in the suit."

"You still haven't let me see that suit."

"You've seen my suit."

"Not the stealth suit. THE suit."

"You'll see it when you see it. I'm still working out some of the kinks. And okay, while we're on the subject, since when do you still have the old stealth suit?"

"What, you don't like it?"

"I ... didn't say that."

"Kinda sounds like that's what you're saying."

"It's not. I'm just ...

"... Just what?"

"...Do we have mustard for these sandwiches? We need mustard."

* * *

The phone rings exactly twice before his call is picked up. "Hello, Iron Man," the amused, crisp voice says.

"Hello your highness," Tony greets with equal aplomb.

"It has been a long time since last I heard from you."

"Yes it has. And I have to say I wish it was under better circumstances."

"I take it this heavily encrypted call is not for social purposes, then?"

"... I'm afraid not."

* * *

An hour later, Tony walks back in the common room. Steve is pouring over the stolen files as Tony had requested, to check for anything Tony might have missed. The photos of known associates have already been printed and are now hanging in the conference room. Tony had laughed and called Steve 'Columbo', and after a quick Google search, Steve had determined how outdated that reference was and resolved not to be mad about it.
Tony throws himself down onto the couch, bouncing Steve a little with the force of it. Steve casts a questioning glance over at Tony, who is now sunk deep into the couch, elbow resting on the arm of it, hand over his face, legs spread out wide in front of him. He’s the very picture of exasperation.

"Good talk?" Steve asks innocuously.

Tony sighs through his nose and shakes his head. "Judging by how evasive he got, I'm assuming they had no idea about the vibranium. So, whatever's going on, it's not a government-sanctioned operation."

"So, where did you leave things?"

"They're going to start 'investigating' immediately. That's all he said. Then he hung up on me."

Steve snorts. Tony casts him an incredulous sidelong glance. Steve raises his hands defensively, and Tony looks away, closes his eyes, leans heavily into his hand, phone clutched in a death grip in the other hand. It creaks a little and Steve winces. "Ease up, Tony, or you're gonna break it," he says gently.

Tony looks down in surprise and sits the phone down gently. "Shit. I keep forgetting."

Steve smiles sympathetically. "It's okay. I think I ruined about ten before you finally made me one that wouldn't break so damn easily."

Tony's gaze goes long and wistful. "Oh, yeah. God, that feels like a lifetime ago. God, Steve, would you ever have thought ..." he trails off, shaking his head, undoubtedly watching the reel of the past decade play out in his head.

Steve joins him in his recollection. He sees it all - the times they laughed (birthdays, Christmas parties, lazy afternoons in the tower before it all went to shit), the times they cried (Peggy's funeral, when they thought they had lost everything, when they knew they had lost Nat), the times they fought so much they couldn't stand the sight of one another (any mission in the beginning, The Accords, Siberia), and the times that all Steve wanted to do was see Tony's face (after the Battle of Wakanda, after Tony's funeral).

He thinks about the incredible things (aliens and gods and monsters and science so advanced it still makes his head spin even after living in the modern world for over a decade now), and he thinks about all of the mundane things that have existed despite the incredible things (sleepy early mornings at the breakfast table with Tony and two cups of coffee, afternoons in the workshop with Tony and a pencil and a drawing pad, picnics outdoors with Tony and a thick, soft blanket and sandwiches and beer, movie nights where Tony falls asleep on Steve's shoulder, cooking dinner together even though Tony's skill in the kitchen begins and ends with cheeseburgers). And when he thinks of how impossibly large his world has become, he feels like that skinny little guy from Brooklyn who just wanted to be where the fight was, who never thought in a million years he'd find his person.

"No, Tony. I never would'a thought."

Some time later, Tony finally lets the exhaustion of the past few days catch up with him, and falls asleep on the couch, head balanced tenuously in his hand, with his elbow propped up precariously against the arm of the couch. Steve sighs, letting that fond smile slip into place that is so inexplicably tied to Tony. He stands and gently arranges Tony comfortably against the pillows, shushing him gently as he mutters something incoherent, stroking his arm until his brow smooths out and he
relaxes back into restful sleep. And then he sits and pulls Tony's legs into his lap and picks up a book instead of the StarkPad with all the files on it, because of course Tony had found everything there was to find, and asking Steve to read them had been more about teamwork than about Tony worrying he'd made a mistake. And for the next few hours, Steve reads and listens to the soft noises Tony makes in his sleep, and wonders how, despite everything, he is lucky enough to still be able to have moments like this.

Chapter End Notes

link for a picture of the Iron Man stealth suit:
https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/avfih1/stealth_suit_concept_for_mark_1_armor/
^^all credit goes to the artist, not me

Also sorry about the Audi joke, but I couldn't resist.
In his dreams, he is in that beautiful, terrifying, desolate realm, staring out at the burning horizon, and something whispers you are worthy.

The voice is so familiar, but all he can do is scream, "of what?!"

The voice doesn't answer him. He can never quite place the voice.

* * *

He pulls himself up from the murky depths of unconsciousness, silent but with a full-body flinch, and somehow Steve is still there, and his feet are in Steve's lap, and Steve's hand flies down to gently wrap around his calf, anchoring him as he catches his bearings. Whatever he had dreamed is already bleeding out of his memory and back into his subconscious. It's a frustrating thing, to try to recall a dream and forgetting more and more of it the harder you try to remember.

"You alright?" Steve asks him, and when he nods, Steve looks a little amused and a little concerned and just a little bit fond, and it nearly takes his breath away to look at him because it's at that moment that he realizes. God, he realizes. He's staring and some distant part of him recognizes that this isn't normal behavior, god Stark, stop staring, but he can't. Because this is the moment he falls in love.

This is it, he thinks, looking at Steve's beautiful smile, his kind eyes. I can't come back from this.

* * *

"You alright?" he asks, and when Tony nods, still looking at him a little dazed, he smiles. And then Tony keeps staring at him, and it's intense enough to make the hair at the back of his neck stand up. "You sure?"

Eventually Tony's eyes lose that blunt, distant look and he meets Steve's gaze, or at least the general area around his face, swallowing audibly. "Yeah. Just. Weird dream."

"Normal weird or..."

"I don't know." Tony winces, and Steve can hear the frustration in his voice. "I can't remember. The more I try to hold onto it the more it just -" he waves his hand vaguely, and Steve knows what he means. Has learned over the years to decipher his friend's unique nonverbal communications.

"Maybe it'll come back to you later," Steve suggests, because the silence is stretching longer and thinner and it's odd, to see Tony so quiet.

"Yeah. Maybe." The words are an afterthought, and Tony is a thousand miles away from him. Exhaustion seems to be pulling at him, and judging by his stiff posture and pained glint in his eyes, he's fighting off another migraine.

"Tony-" Steve tries again, softer this time.

Tony jumps. "Yeah. Sorry. It's just ..." He's looking at Steve oddly again and seems torn between two things, neither of which Steve is privy to. "Migraine, I think. Everything's too bright
"F.R.I.D.A.Y., lights at 50%," Steve says softly. The lights dim and sighs audibly. "Better?" Tony nods, still fidgety, avoiding Steve's gaze now. He's playing with his hands, rubbing the pinky of his left hand between the thumb and index finger of his right hand. "Maybe you should get some sleep, Tony," Steve tries. And when Tony doesn't answer, "Do you ... can I help?" He thinks of what it had been like to lie with Tony's head resting on his shoulder, his body pressed up against Steve's, Steve's hands running through his hair lightly. The smell of him and the warmth of it and ... Buck was right. You got it bad, Rogers.

Tony inhales deep, placing his hands on his knees, visibly collecting himself. And Steve feels a twinge of ... something, because they don't keep things from one another, not anymore. Tony postures for the press, not for Steve. "Actually, I think I'm gonna- yeah, I'm gonna head to the workshop for a bit." He pops his back and stands.

"Tony..."

"I'll be in the workshop."

It's not an invitation. Steve doesn't follow him.

* * *

Steve gives it four hours, loses himself in a few domestic mundanities, and then he goes to check on Tony.

He takes it as a good sign that Tony hasn't locked him out of the lab. And when he walks in, it's quiet, which is not totally unusual, because Tony's bots never made it to the compound, meaning this lab is void of their constant whirring. But as Steve walks further in, he sees Tony slumped over at one of the worktables, his head pillowed on one arm while the other stretches out in front of him. A pair of aviation snips rests in his upturned hand. Steve walks closer, and all he can think is god he looks so young and god he looks exhausted. And Steve knows he can't just leave him here, as much as he wanted to be left alone.

Gently, Steve takes the aviation snips from Tony's lax grip and sets them aside. He cards a hand gently through Tony's hair, allowing himself that one small thing for just a moment. Then, he kneels carefully in front of Tony so he is at eye level with him. "Tony," he tries softly. Tony doesn't respond. He places a hand on Tony's shoulder and squeezes gently, rubbing his thumb lightly over Tony's shoulder blade. "Tony," he says, a bit louder. Tony jumps and inhales quickly through his nose, finally opening his eyes, looking right at Steve. Steve is acutely aware of how close they are now.

"Steve? Whattimizit?" Tony mumbles, rubbing at his eyes. It's very endearing, and Steve can't help but smile.

"It's a little after one. You should get some sleep." Tony is sitting up now, leaning heavily against the table, blinking blearily at his surroundings. Steve notices that the lights are much dimmer than usual.

"Thought I just did." Tony isn't looking at Steve, so he misses the look that Steve cuts him.

"Real sleep. In a bed, Tony," Steve says firmly.

Tony winces, and it only accentuates the tired, pinched look he's been wearing around for the past few days. "Why are you so loud?"

"I'm not," Steve says indignanty.
Tony pinches the bridge of his nose. "God, why do I feel like I have a hangover," he moans.

"Because you need sleep," Steve says, grabbing Tony's arm and hauling him up onto his feet. "Come on."

* * *

That night, Tony's dreams are full of strange and inexplicable things and a voice that sounds so beautiful and familiar that he will not remember when he wakes up. He does not sleep peacefully.

* * *

"Now this is just sad."

Tony groans at the intrusion, burying his head deeper into his pillow. He hardly remembers getting in bed last night, but Steve was there, helping him because he was almost too far-gone to walk to his own room. And Steve had helped him gently into bed and pulled the blankets up around him and he may or may not have dreamed the feather-light ghosting of fingers on his forehead and the soft whisper of "good night, Tony."

He is jostled suddenly as Rhodey throws himself down to perch on the side of the bed next to Tony's hip. "Come on, Iron Ass, it's almost noon."

"Just fuck off and let me sleep, Rhodes," Tony growls, but most of the threat is muffled by his pillow. And if his head weren't pounding so badly it would be infinitely amusing, because they'd had so many mornings like this at MIT, hadn't they.

"Nuh-uh. Steve said you've been sleeping for over 11 hours now. You need to get up. Also, Steve's getting that constipated look on his face, I think he's worried about ya." The bed lifts as Rhodey gets up. He flings a shirt at Tony's head and Tony groans again. "Come on, I'm takin' you to coffee."

And yeah, coffee sounds good. So with the promise of caffeine, Tony mumbles incoherently and rolls out of the bed, landing in a heap of blankets on the floor.

Rhodey snorts. "He's beauty and he's grace."

"He'll kick your ass if you don't shut your mouth."

* * *

Carol's Coffee Corner abounds in alliteration and in quaint, small-town charm. The place is nearly empty when they get there, but they select a seat in the back just as a precaution.

Tony twirls a wooden coffee stirrer between his fingers, then sticks it between his teeth and gives Rhodey what he imagines is a winsome grin. "So, Honeybear. What's the occasion?"

Rhodey doesn't answer right away, just kind of stares, and Tony knows that face, and he knows Rhodey needs a minute just to stare at him and try to comprehend all over again why his best friend is now almost young enough to be his son. It's one of the reasons he'd cut his hair so early on. As long as it had been, it had looked downright boyish on him. And if Tony thinks about it too much, he's going to freak out, so instead he fills the silence with his inane babbling. "I mean, not that I'm not flattered. You, whisking me off to exotic locales just like you used to do in the old days." Tony takes an appreciative look around the cafe, and is rewarded with a snort from Rhodey.

"Exotic, huh," he says, unimpressed.
"Oh yeah. I mean, look at that," Tony says, gesturing to an older woman clearing tables, wearing an apron covered in pictures of cats. "You can't get that in the city."

Rhodey shakes his head wryly. "The occasion is I had a few days off and I thought you might wanna get out of the house a little. And, I missed your stupid face. I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine. Great."

"Tony."

His smile falters, and he can already feel it slipping from his eyes. Rhodey could always read him like a book. He rubs the back of his neck awkwardly, taps out a staccato beat with the coffee stirrer. He notices with razor-sharp focus how loud it suddenly is and stops. Rhodey waits patiently, just looking at him, so open and trustworthy. Tony fights the urge to spill everything, lay it all out on the small, wobbly table in front of them. "I..."

"Is it your powers?" Rhodey tries. "Is it-"

"-No."

"What is it, then?"

"Steve."

Rhodey frowns. "What about him? I thought things were okay now."

"They are. Just... They're... very okay."

"And that's... bad..."

Tony snaps the coffee stirrer. "Yes, it's bad," he hisses quietly. His other hand is gripping the table so hard it's beginning to creak worrisomely.

"Okay, okay. Ease up, He-Man. Why is that bad?"

He looks down at the table, carefully easing up on his grip. When he looks back at Rhodey, there's nothing but concern in his friend's eyes. Tony hates how desperate he must look, because it's exactly how he feels. "Because, I think I love him, Rhodey."

Rhodey blinks, opens his mouth and then shuts it again with a click. It would be comical, if Tony didn't suddenly feel like he's just been emotionally eviscerated. Rhodey bites the inside of his cheek, his fingers rapidly drumming against the table. It's very loud and Tony winces. Then, it stops. "Are you sure about this?"

Tony snorts humorlessly, leaning back in his chair with a wry shake of his head. "Yes."

Rhodey nods. "Okay, then. Come on, let's take a walk."

* * *

He tips his head up toward the sun, blindly bumping shoulders with Rhodey. He drinks in the afternoon warmth greedily as it beats down on his face. For awhile, they say nothing.

"How long?" Rhodey asks eventually.
A day. A lifetime. "I don't know," is what he settles on.

* * *

The old poster had been there on his wall since the beginning of time, it felt like. Some of his earliest memories were of that room, and that damn poster. It was a collector's item, and yet his father had given it to him, from his personal collection. Perhaps it had been with the hope that Tony would turn out like Captain America. In the end, both Howard and Tony had been disappointed on that front. And on particularly bad days, when the smell of expensive scotch made him want to vomit, and the words stung just as much as the physical blows, he'd sit on his bed, dangle his legs over the side, and talk to that poster.

At seven years old, he hadn't even known what a war bond was, but damn if Captain America had made him want to buy one.

"Hey, Cap." He always called him Cap, when he talked to him. But that stayed just between him and the poster, along with many other private admissions that he'd aired to his empty room over the years. "Dad got really mad at me today. He yelled a lot. It makes me feel bad when he yells. It makes my stomach hurt." Cap had remained silent, giving him that jaunty two-fingered salute as always. "I wish I could be more like you, Cap. Maybe if I was more like you Dad wouldn't get so mad at me all the time." He'd sat quietly for awhile after that, picking distractedly at a scab on his knee until his mother called him for dinner. "Gotta go," he'd announced, tumbling off the bed. "Thanks for listening, Cap."

* * *

"Why Steve? You guys used to hate each other."

"Yeah, well, now we don't. He's ... what's not to love, Rhodey, I mean he's Captain fucking America."

"So ... patriotism's your kink or something?"

"No! It's more than that. That was just ..." Tony huffs frustratedly, "... just an illustration. He's more than Captain America. He's ...

"-Steve Rogers," Rhodey finishes, nodding sagely.

Tony sighs. "Yeah. He's Steve fucking Rogers."

"Okay. So what are you gonna do?"

He wants to be angry at the question, but can't muster up enough fire for it. He's so tired. "Nothing. Of course nothing."

"Why?"

"That's a stupid question, Rhodes."

* * *

At age nine, he'd finally gotten around to asking what a war bond was. Jarvis had smiled knowingly down at him and told him. That night, his father had come home early, gotten drunk, and pushed him to the ground. He'd run into his room, locked the door, and cried softly so that no one would hear him. "Why doesn't he like me, Cap? Why doesn't he like me?" Cap had kind, expressive eyes. One
of the things he'd always loved about the poster. And that night, looking into those eyes had just made him cry more.

* * *

"Be nice," Rhodey warns kindly. It makes him hate himself just a little bit. He deflates, letting his shoulders cave in as they walk side by side through the near-empty streets of the small town.

He takes a deep breath and tries to do better this time. "You know why, Rhodey," is what he ends up with.

"What, because you don't think Captain America swings that way?"

"That is one of many reasons, yes."

* * *

At age eleven, he learned that war bonds had been done away with awhile ago in favor of the more innocuously named 'savings bonds', but Tony was set to inherit a multi-billion-dollar company, so he figured his bases were well-covered. This was also the age that he discovered girls. And, more distressingly, boys. He kept this last revelation to himself, though. He'd heard his father for years ridicule the 'frou-frou Nancy boys' who lived across the street, and he knew better than to say anything about it to anyone.

"What am I gonna do, Cap?" he whispered quietly to the poster.

* * *

"You know for someone who's not interested, he sure dotes on you a lot."

Tony wrinkles his nose indignantly. "He ... does not. Dote. He's just ... he's a good friend. He's helping me try to wrap my head around the shit-show that is my life."

"Uh-huh. Yeah, that's probably all it is." Something about Rhodey's tone is mocking, and Tony squints suspiciously at him. "He's probably just happy to have you back."

Tony nods judiciously. "Yep. Exactly."

"Probably relieved you're here to help him with the team."

"Sure, yeah."

"Because we all really missed you, man."

"As you should have."

"And when you died, it nearly tore Steve apart."

"..huh?" Tony swivels on his heel, lets Rhodey catch up to him.

Rhodey shrugs, hands stuffed in his pockets. Maddeningly, purposefully casual. "He really took it hard, Tones. I think he blamed himself, because you two never fully reconciled. I think he missed you, too. Plain n' simple. Until your funeral, I'd never seen Captain America cry."

Tony has seen Steve cry three times. The first time was at Peggy's funeral, when they'd carried the casket down the aisle of the grand church. Silent tears had streamed down Steve's face and Tony had
resolutely ignored him, because Tony didn't cry, but if Captain America was crying, Tony wouldn't be far behind. Peggy and Steve were a love that could never have been. A tragedy for the ages.

The second was when Tony had come back. Steve had openly sobbed that night. It was gut-wrenching, but somehow cleansing for both of them. The third was one of the nights Steve had stayed with him. One silent tear had rolled down his face, into his beard as they'd laid there together, and it had nearly broken Tony.

He shakes off the weight of the memories, tries not to think about how three of the four known incidences of Steve crying had been over him, lets all of it fade back that far-back place in his head where he keeps dangerous things. "I don't know what to tell you. We're good friends. That's it." Then he casts a mischievous sidelong glance at Rhodey. "You jealous or something, Platypus?" Rhodey shoves playfully at his shoulder, but it has little effect. He's too strong now, can't be knocked around unless he wants to be.

"I'm not jealous. I'm grateful you have someone to watch your back when I'm not around."

And that's the thing about Steve. Tony knows that whatever happens, Steve will have his back. He thinks of that old, faded poster, probably collecting dust in a storage facility somewhere where they'd had all of Howard's things shipped when Tony had sold the house. How is it that you've always been there for me, he wonders. Even when you didn't know it, you were there for me.

* * *

Tony lets Rhodey drive them back to the compound, because slowly but surely the sun is beating down heavier and heavier on them and Tony's wearing his heavy-duty 'hangover' sunglasses and it's still not enough to ease the pounding ache in his head. He makes some joke so Rhodey doesn't notice his discomfort, but if Rhodey sees through his false bravado, he doesn't comment.

Back inside the shaded, cool atmosphere of the compound, his headache lessens and he can breathe again. Rhodey leaves in the late afternoon, and Tony, suddenly exhausted lays down on the couch and sleeps for three hours. He wakes up to someone shaking his shoulder gently, and when he cracks an eye open, he instantly regrets it. Because it's too bright, too bright and Steve is talking too loud and he can hear his own heartbeat and the blood pulsing in his ears and the whirring of cicadas outside and the hum of the air conditioner and it's all agonizing. He groans and clutches his head.

"Shit."

"Tony? What's wrong?" Steve's voice is urgent and too loud. Tony tries to bury his face into the couch pillow but it doesn't drown out the painful cacophony of ambient noise. "Tony?" Steve tries again. A warm hand rests on his shoulder. Had Steve always touched him so much?

"Migraine?" he hears Steve ask.

"I don't know, it's ... I can hear everything. It's too much."

Steve's voice drops lower, softer. "What do you hear, Tony?"

He curls into the couch even more, biting back a groan. "Everything. The ... fucking birds chirping outside, the leaves rustling, the damn dishwasher running in there. I can hear my own heart beating, Steve. What the hell is wrong with me?" he asks miserably.

Steve seems to pause, and Tony can't see him, but he can hear the click of his throat as he swallows hard. "Nothing's wrong with you, Tony. Come on." And suddenly he's being helped off the couch
against his will. He makes a small sound of protest, but Steve grips him tighter, helping him down the hallway. "It's alright. This'll help, I promise."

And then they're in Steve's room and it's mercifully dark and it's relatively quiet except for the sound their combined breathing and their hearts beating slightly off-rhythm. Tony's is currently much faster than Steve's, but he can feel it slowing because the relief is palpable. He sighs shakily as Steve leads him over to the bed, supporting most of his weight since most of Tony's energy up had up until that point been focused on not vomiting or passing out or doing anything else embarrassing. "Sit here," Steve murmurs, voice barely above a whisper. Tony sits, and Steve sits down next to him so they're facing one another. "You know how the stones increased your strength and speed? I think they may have ... enhanced other things as well."

And shit, it makes sense. Would explain why he's been having the migraines, why the sound of a screwdriver scraping across an aluminum sheet nearly made him lose his mind yesterday, why he feels like he's been living with a perpetual hangover. "Fuck," he breathes.

"It's okay," Steve says gently. "Once your brain learns to process the extra stimuli, you'll get used to it. But at first, it's difficult. Helps to get somewhere dark and quiet and just try to find one thing to focus on. Helps with the headaches."

And sometimes he forgets Steve wasn't always a super-soldier. Once, he was scrawny and weak and sickly - Tony's seen the pictures, loves that Steve just as much as this one - and going from one to the other so suddenly must have been quite a shock to the system. Tony nods and closes his eyes, choosing to focus on the sound of Steve's heart beating right across from him, because Steve is always his 'one thing', lately. It's sure and steady and comforting, and it helps him drown out everything else. The relief is instantaneous, and he sighs, letting the sound of Steve's beautiful, kind, good heart wash over him.

After awhile, he opens his eyes again, and Steve is looking at him intently. "You alright?" he asks carefully.

Tony nods. "Yeah. That helped. Thanks."

Steve smiles and it's infectious, catching the corner of his mouth as well and drawing it up into a crooked grin. "Good. What did you focus on?"

He thinks about lying, but instead he reaches out and taps Steve on the sternum, right above his heart. "This, right here."

* * *

So the thing about having enhanced senses it that the loud things are louder and the bright things are brighter, but also the beautiful things are even more beautiful. Tony has never noticed the dusting of freckles on the tops of Steve's cheekbones before, has never noticed how deeply fragrant his cologne is, has never heard the quiet humming he does when he thinks no one can hear. And all of these things only add to the insurmountable pile of evidence that Tony has been compiling against himself, that proves just how irrevocably in love with Steve Rogers he is.

And having a few days of radio silence helps, because for the first few days, Tony could be set off by anything, with absolutely zero warning. The setting sun blazing a path in through the living room windows, the roar of the ever-offending dishwasher that Tony is seriously contemplating having disassembled and sold for parts. And all of this would be manageable on his own, it would, except Steve is always there, every time, even when Tony thinks he's hiding it, and every time, Steve stops and touches him with such achingly gentle hands and whispers softly, checking to see if he's alright.
And when he's not, Steve leads Tony to his room and sits him on his bed and takes Tony's hand and places it against his chest, a silent request for Tony to close his eyes and focus on Steve's heartbeat.

And god, there's a strikingly telling symbolism in there somewhere. And maybe that's why Tony finally does it. Because this new thing is just the cherry on top, it's really all the evidence he will ever need that he's head-over-heels, downright embarrassingly in love with Steve, and there's absolutely no coming back from something like that. Not now. And maybe it's because no one has been by the facility in awhile and they've been with one another in a near-constant capacity for days, and it's been totally and completely fine. No harsh words, no arguments, no moments of irritation, just Steve and Tony and movie nights and jokes and sparring and afternoons in the workshop, and cooking meals together, and just so many light touches and gentle, lilting words that Tony had noticed before but hadn't really noticed like he's noticing now.

So, when he's coming down from the latest near-panic of the painful assault on his senses, his hand pressed to Steve's warm, solid chest, Steve's hand around his wrist, holding it there securely, it really just makes complete sense for him to wrap his other hand around Steve's neck and bring Steve's forehead down to his lips. Because there are times, especially lately, when it seems like Steve is the only thing in his world that makes sense, and whether or not Steve loves him back that way, he wants Steve to know how grateful he is for the fact that Steve has been there for him every step of the way.

And he's probably still a little too sensitive for it because it burns like fire when his lips meet the skin of Steve's forehead, and he can feel every line etched into the skin there, can feel how Steve's hair tickles his face, can feel how Steve's grip around his wrist tightens by a degree, how the goosebumps are starting to form along Steve's neck where his hand is resting.

And when he pulls away, Steve is looking at him with painfully wide, confused eyes. "Tony," he whispers. "What-

And he smiles, because he was never expecting anything back, because that's not what love is. So he merely says, "Thank you, Steve" and slides off the bed, leaving Steve in the cool, darkened room and hoping he didn't just complicate things.

* * *

The next time he sees Steve that day, he looks to be in a bit of a daze, but he smiles and Tony smiles back, and Tony thinks ok, maybe it was fine and maybe he knew that it was only a kiss of gratitude between friends, because friends do that, right? And Tony's always been very hands-on, it's just in his nature. He's half-Italian and he's a flirt and it's just who he is. And he and Steve don't exactly have a standard friendship. Steve has held him against his chest far too much for that to be true. And so, therefore, it's all fine. They're fine and Steve's fine and Tony's fine and he's not dying a little bit on the inside at the shattering realization that he's in love with Steve Rogers and Steve Rogers probably has never seen him as more than just a good friend. Because if he did, he would've said something by now, right? All the times that they've shared a bed together, held one another, cried together, Steve would've said something by now. God, Tony wants a drink.

So instead, he heads to the gym and breaks three punching bags before he realizes it's just not cutting it. Maybe he should call Bruce up. He hasn't seen Bruce in awhile. Maybe he could even get Bruce to spar with him. Wouldn't that be interesting? So when Steve gets a call from Bucky to help him and Sam move into their new shared new apartment in New York (and god, Tony wonders how the hell that will go, the two of them under one roof) and Steve heads off immediately (perfect timing really, and nothing to do with avoiding Tony at all), Tony calls up Bruce, and Bruce sounds infinitely relieved to hear from him and flies out immediately.
And maybe he hadn't thought this through, because lunch out with Bruce is exceedingly more conspicuous than sneaking into a local coffee shop with Rhody. And Tony really can't concentrate with all the murmuring because he can hear exactly what is being murmured now, and some animals actually use the flash when they take photos with their phones during the day, and it just about cuts right through Tony's eyes into his brain and sends him spinning into the beginning stages of a migraine unless he gets out now, so with one look, they decide to get lunch to go.

And eating tacos on the front lawn of the Avengers Facility isn't quite the 'getting out of the house' experience Tony had wanted, but it's something, and hey, maybe Bruce will spar with him now. So they eat tacos and talk about Bruce's research, and Bruce asks about Steve of course, because they're always together now, and Tony tries to smile and answer casually, but he gets the sense that he doesn't quite manage it, because Bruce is looking at him with those big, green, sympathetic eyes.

"You okay, Tony?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good, big guy. Things are good here." And they are, that's the thing. That's what makes it everything so bright and painful.

Bruce takes a deep, fortifying breath, his hand spreading idly over the huge, thick picnic blanket they've spread over the grass. "Can I ask ... " and the rest of the question catches in his throat, so the words just hang there, unnerving, in front of them.

And all Tony can do is play it casual. "What's up, Bruce?" and it's probably too quiet for his normal tone, probably too telling.

"Tony ... you and Steve ... are you-"

"-We're good, buddy. We're good," he interrupts, smiling that fake megawatt smile he always gives blithely to the press and never to his friends, unless he's desperate.

And Bruce looks a little hurt, and Tony is an absolute monster and he hates himself. "Oh. Okay, Tony."

Bruce does agree to spar with him later, if only because he sees how desperate Tony is to punch something that won't break so easily. And Tony has to admit, it's a challenge, because Bruce is big, but he's also pretty fast, and he's hellishly strong. And then, he actually starts trying to talk to Tony. And maybe Tony should be insulted, because he's clearly not giving Bruce enough of a workout, so he pushes harder.

"Come on, Tony, what's goin' on? You can talk to me."

Tony dodges a large swiping hand and punches Bruce right in the diaphragm, which cuts off anything else he was going to say. "Nothin's wrong, buddy," he grunts. "Just gettin' a little stir-crazy in here."

Bruce makes a grab for Tony's leg to sweep it out from under him, but Tony jumps high and actually steps up onto Bruce's arm as it passes under him, using it to jump off and onto Bruce's back, where he clings with his arm around Bruce's throat.

"Woah, that was- that was pretty cool. What are you tryin' to do now, though?" Bruce says, finally sounding a little out-of-breath.

Tony pauses to think about it. "Uh ... hmm. Not really sure." He loosens his grip a little, preparing to
jump off, but Bruce throws him, and he lands in a crouch on the mat.

"Damn, Tony."

Tony grins roguishly. "I got more where that came from, buddy. Come on."

"Tony, not that I don't appreciate a good fight, because let's face it, there's not a whole lotta people that can give me one nowadays. But, it really seems like you're working off some pent-up frustration here. Which is great. But ... what's it stemming from?"

"Thought you weren't that kinda doctor, Bruce."

Bruce shrugs. "Well, I mean we've all been to therapy at this point, right? Except you, maybe. And, I gotta say, it's helped me become more emotionally intelligent."

Tony slips through Bruce's grasp and lands a punch to his side, right in the ribs. "That's great, buddy, but I honestly just wanted to punch something."

Bruce aims a kick low and it gets Tony in the knee, sending it crashing into the mat. "Come on, Tony. Just talk to me. Is it Steve?" Bruce puts a comforting hand on his shoulder, and he must mistake it for part of the fight because the next thing he knows, he's flipped Bruce over and onto the mat and he's crouched, fist raised, over him, hands shaking and burning with that pent-up power that just wants to be released.

Bruce just looks at him mildly. "So that's a yes?"

* * *

So after spilling everything to Bruce, he sits, panic slowly rising up inside of him the longer Bruce remains silent. "Okay, buddy. You gotta give me something here, you're killing me," he finally says, and the words are tinted with just enough desperation that Bruce finally responds.

"Oh my god, Tony. I ... I had no idea. I ... oh god."

He feels a little sick to his stomach. He should've kept it to himself. "I know, okay, Bruce? I know it's bad, I-"

"No!" Bruce interrupts with shocking vehemence. "Don't ... you can't call it that, Tony, don't call it that. It's not bad. You ... you can't help who you love."

And it's not really an endorsement but it's not an indictment either. And Bruce is still sitting there, just looking at him the same as he always does, so that has to mean something.

"How long?"

And god, that's the question, isn't it? And it's complicated, because Tony had loved Cap since day one. But Tony hadn't always loved Steve, and that realization had crept up on him, so startlingly sudden that he can't actually pinpoint when he'd started to love Steve so much. "Does it really matter?" is what he says, feeling and sounding like the very definition of defeat.

Bruce doesn't say anything, just keeps looking at him with those big, sad, green eyes. And Tony knows what he's doing, using silence to try to draw more out of Tony, and god, did Bruce go and get another PhD while Tony was "dead", because ... well that would just be too much now, wouldn't it.

He really wants to punch something. His skin feels sticky and hot, his palms are practically burning
with it. He can feel that desire flowing tinglingly down his arms, and he will certain punch something unless someone says something.

And maybe Bruce senses that. "Tony, you and Steve. I dunno, man, but I've never seen anything like you guys. You fight like you share a brain, and you're unstoppable in combat, and lately, you two just seem to work. You're just in sync with everything."

And those words hurt, more than he expected them to. "What's your point, Bruce" he says a little too edgily.

Bruce sighs that long-suffering, patient sigh of his. "My point is, I've loved two people in my life, and I let them both slip away from me." And Tony wonders, but he doesn't ask, if one of them was Nat. "Don't let that happen to you, too."

* * *

"-Turn, Wilson, turn!"

"I am turning, man! You turn!"

"I am turned as much as I can possibly turn. You have to turn. It's physics, dumbass."

"Fuck your physics, man," Sam says, but pivots in the stairwell, turning the oversized couch around the corner and up one flight closer to their floor.

"Very mature," Bucky says flatly, and Steve snorts softly, carrying an armchair up by himself and wondering not for the first time why Bucky and Sam have decided to move in together.

The consensus, when Steve had asked ever so delicately, had been that rent in the city was just too damn high. And the rebuttal, when Steve had politely reminded them that they were Avengers and on the same team with a billionaire who gave away money like it was nothing, had been that they weren't the kind of guys to ask for a handout. And the response when Steve had gently asserted that it wouldn't be a hand-out if it was given willingly between friends, had been two pairs of eyes silently warning him, 'Just let it go, man. We're doing this.' So, here they are.

And when they finally get everything moved in, Sam collapses unceremoniously onto the couch, and Bucky falls in next to him, like he's actually tired and not probably just acting like it for Sam's benefit. So Steve grabs three beers, passes them out, and sits in the armchair to stare at ... the empty wall. "You guys need a TV," he says after a long pull from his beer. He's not physically tired per se, but the stairwell was not well-ventilated.

"I keep sayin' that," Bucky gripes.

"He likes watching the faces," Sam says. "He's still working on recognizing human emotion, I think it helps him."

Bucky shoves him, coming dangerously close to making him slosh beer all over the white couch. (God, why had they chosen white?) "Shut up, Wilson."

"Soo, Steve. How's the hubby?"

Steve nearly chokes on his beer, much to the delight of Sam and Bucky. "The what?"

"Oh, okay, see he's a grandpa, he still doesn't get the modern slang," Bucky says. "It's short for husband, Steve," he says, raising his voice as if Steve is hard-of-hearing. And right now, he kind of
wishes he was.

"I dunno what you guys are talkin' about," Steve says, feeling some good old-fashioned Brooklyn attitude coming out.

"Aww, look at him, he's blushing."

"That's cute, Stevie. That's real cute."

And Steve contemplates how much it would hurt if he threw himself out the window of a seventh-story walk-up.

* * *

When Bruce leaves, he finally gives into that aggression, that nearly irresistible feeling clawing at him from the inside. He has to get it out. He wants to let it out. He goes for one of the reinforced punching bags, a little harder to break, and he lets it all out. And it feels good. All of that strength, flowing out of him through his fists, the warm blossoming in his chest and radiating down through his arms, making his fists burn with the heat of untapped potential. And he thinks about what Bruce had said and he thinks about how Steve would never want someone like him, and about how they have too much of a complicated history for things to work out, and about how Captain America is a straight-laced, all-American, apple pie guy and would never be with a man anyway, and he just lets it all flow out of him. And the heat is building in his chest, and his arms are on fire, and his fists are light and quick and practically glowing, and then, huh, they're actually glowing, and before he can fully process it, he lands one more punch, and a burst of light eats up his entire field of vision, and then everything goes black.

* * *

He hadn't planned on coming back right away, but the good-natured teasing had been a bit too much to handle, and even though Sam and Bucky had laid off of him after a few minutes of light jabs, the feeling that they'd both known his deepest secret had been a bit too much with everything that had happened. Because Tony had kissed him on the forehead and Steve's heart had flipped over in his chest and his entire body had been set on fire, and Tony had simply said thank you and had walked away, so it meant nothing. It was just an affectionate show of gratitude between two friends. Because Tony Stark was a hands-on guy, and yes, he didn't go around kissing people a lot, but Steve is sure that it's happened before, almost 100% sure. And Tony Stark didn't date men, not anymore, not since Steve has known him. And Steve has to wonder if it's not a part of him anymore. If it had been something he'd liked to do as a younger man, just kissing boys, like Steve had done, and he'd gotten it out of his system somehow and just ... moved on to a more easy-to-explain lifestyle. And that hurt, to think about. Because it was still such a deeply ingrained part of who Steve is, that side of things. It's never going away, not for Steve.

And it's an addiction, really, that deep desire to keep coming back to something that's only going to bring him pain. But Tony was dead, and now he's not. So Steve can't bring himself to care.

And when he steps through the door, he feels immediate relief. He's home. And when he goes into the kitchen, Tony's not there, and that's unusual, because it's around the time they usually eat. So, probably Tony got caught up in the workshop. But he's not in there either. So, he's in the gym, maybe.

And Steve walks into the gym, and his knees nearly go out under him. Because Tony's just lying there on his side, on the mat, not moving at all.
"Oh god, Tony?" Steve sprints the remaining distance, falling to his knees in front of Tony. "Tony, come on, please don't." and Tony is so still and pale, and Steve reaches two trembling fingers under his chin, and nearly collapses with relief when he finds a pulse. "Oh, thank god," he whispers. He grabs Tony's face in his hands. "Tony? Come on. Come on, Tony wake up. Come on," he begs. His thumbs brush gently over Tony's cheeks and finally Tony's eyes flutter. "Hey, hey," Steve says softly. Tony makes a weak sound in his throat and forces his eyes open. They land on Steve briefly and then close again.

"Steve," he says, moving his head gingerly. His voice is hoarse and Steve wonders worriedly how long he's been out.

"Hey, Tony I'm right here." Steve is still holding Tony's face lightly, his thumbs brushing over Tony's cheekbones.

Tony tries to move and then seems to think better of it, wincing. "Shit."

"Take it easy, Tony," Steve says, even though Tony is struggling to sit up again. He's propping himself up on his left arm, favoring his right arm oddly. Steve pulls Tony up against him before he falls back onto the floor from his precarious position. With another wince, Tony brings his right arm up against him, and Steve finally sees it.

"Oh god, Tony," he breathes, horrified.

* * *

Tony's hand is burnt and blistered and he's hardly got any energy to move, so Steve picks him up, cradling him up against his chest.

"Steve-" Tony protests weakly.

"It's okay, it's okay," Steve says, carrying Tony up the stairs to his room and laying him carefully on the bed before running to the bathroom to get the first-aid kit. (Everyone's living quarters had one - Tony had made sure of that). And last time Tony was in his room, on his bed, Tony had kissed him (and yes, it was on the forehead, but ... still). And now, oh god why had Steve left? Why had he run like a coward, because if he'd just been here, maybe he would've been able to prevent whatever happened. Because something had happened. Tony Stark doesn't just pass out on the floor unprovoked. And nobody just gets mysterious burns all over their hand for no reason.

And when Steve comes back with the first-aid kit, Tony is looking at him calmly, but he looks so weak. After checking for more injuries and finding none, Steve grabs his hand gently and begins cleaning and treating and bandaging it. And Tony looks on with heavy-lidded eyes, and he looks like he might go to sleep. "Tony, what happened?" Steve asks. And he thinks he already knows, it's a suspicion that's been creeping up in him ever since he saw the burnt-through hole in the punching bag right about where Tony's right fist would have connected with it. But he has to know. He can't-... he has to know.

The question rouses Tony a bit, making him alert enough to answer. "I don't know, I was ... I was in the gym, and ... shit, Steve this is bad." His words are starting to slur together and his eyes are fluttering.

"Shh, hey, it's okay," Steve says as he finishes wrapping Tony's hand and grabs up the uninjured one, bringing it to his mouth. It's not quite a kiss but not quite not one either. "It'll be okay. It'll be okay," he murmurs against Tony's knuckles. And he wishes he believed it. God, he wishes he believed it.
Chapter End Notes

Every kudo is a bullet in the barrel of your best guy's gun.

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