дезинформация - Chronological Order
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дезинформация - Chronological Order
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Summary

Bucky had only known Anthony Edward Stark for a few hours before he found himself compelled to share a secret that had been eating him alive since he began to once again reclaim the right to his own thoughts and feelings.

Post-Winter Soldier, Bucky is living with the Avengers, attempting to cope with his past, and falls in love with Tony Stark in the process of finding his way back to himself. If you enjoy the story, it is recommended you subscribe, as installments are not posted on a regular
schedule, but new content arrives frequently.

**Note:** This is the alternative, linear presentation of лезиинформация. Understanding that nonlinear narrative is not everyone's cup of tea, I am also posting the work here—it is important to remember that chapter numbers will change, as future installments are written!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Bucky had only known Anthony Edward Stark for a few hours before he found himself compelled to share a secret that had been eating him alive since he began to once again reclaim the right to his own thoughts and feelings.

The secret was a strange one, something that lay dormant until he caught someone staring at his arm. There was no reason to feel broken by the truth, especially considering all of the legitimately horrible secrets keeping this one company, but invariably guilt and shame make themselves known within his aching chest, battling his convictions, forcing him to choke back the words he wished so desperately to scream in the faces of those who looked but failed to see.

The truth always remained unspoken. It shouldn't matter at all, and he's told himself this, but the idea of saying it out loud terrifies him. He can imagine the widening of Steve's eyes upon hearing the secret, can all too easily visualize the sympathy that would be writ across the features of his (only sometimes familiar) face, impossible to ignore. It was the only way he could imagine Steve reacting, and it would feel like a rejection, a negation of his right to his own thoughts and feelings, so Bucky refused to put himself on the line.

Stark was different though. There was no reason to trust him, there was in fact every reason to feel uncomfortable down in the workshop with him (thoughts of another room brimming with equipment had crowded his mind, thoughts of the chair), but instead Bucky felt as if the ever present tension he carried with him had finally eased up enough for him to just… breathe.

Maybe it was because Stark felt like the future, of how he had imagined shiny, futuristic persons would behave, back when he was a kid and bothered to imagine anything at all. Everything about the man was peculiar, confusing, but sort of in a fantastical way.

For a start, Stark hadn’t reacted like anyone else when meeting Bucky. He’d behaved like an overeager puppy, practically salivating over the arm once it was exposed, his eyes wide and childlike as he whistled in appreciation.

“Hello, beautiful!”

Steve had looked ready to grab Stark by the scruff of his neck and toss him across the room, (how many times had he himself protected Steve in much the same way?) but Bucky had just let out a little bark of laughter, and that was that.

He’d been warned about Tony Stark, prior to their arrival. It had been a sort of rambling explanation, one Steve seemed extremely uncomfortable giving, and it was hard to ignore how often he seemed to contradict himself when trying to describe what was in store for Bucky when he finally met the genius. Tony was either incredibly selfish, self-centered, unreliable and bordering on becoming the next big thing on the super villain circuit, or he was Steve’s good friend; an alarmingly dedicated, brilliant workaholic who didn’t hesitate to put his life on the line for his fellow man.

“I thought he was an Avenger?” Bucky had finally snapped, his patience wearing thin. He hated that Steve was treating him like a Victorian maid. “And gave you all a home?”

“He is.” Steve fidgeted at the elevator, still not hitting the call button. “He did.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Yes,” and there was no hesitation there.
“Well then,” and Bucky jabbed the button to summon the elevator, trying to end the discussion altogether.

“He’s just… Try not to take anything he says personally, is all.”

Just before the doors opened to allow them entrance to the workshop level, Steve had added in a hurried whisper, “Whatever you do, don’t mention Howard.”

Once the awkwardness caused by Stark’s eagerness to play with something shiny and new had been jumped like a hurdle by Bucky’s unexpected laugh, Tony began speaking to the disembodied voice of JARVIS, a running dialogue that Bucky had no hope of following, but found to be hypnotic and reassuring nonetheless.

Finally, after twenty minutes of Tony’s rambling, all done while pulling glowing shapes and schematics out of thin air like a magician, Steve seemed to realize there was no big something coming, nothing for him to defuse. He stopped bristling every time Tony actually bothered to say something to Bucky (“Yeah, I’m not calling you that Barnes, it reminds me of rodeos—totally not my scene—and porn, which, hmm. Yes. See what you’ve done? Now Steve’s giving me the look.”), and began to look bored instead.

At some point shortly after that, Steve had received a summons from Coulson, and had been comfortable enough to excuse himself, even if he had looked over his shoulder several times on the way out, like they would never see each other again. Bucky was secretly (guiltily) happy to have him gone, if only because it allowed Stark to fully immerse himself in his scans and diagnostics, which in turn allowed Bucky to observe.

Tony had filled all of the long silences with loud music and rambling directed at his AI and the various robots surrounding them, not bothering to initiate small talk, which was refreshing. He’d throw out questions periodically (“When’s the last time you had heat sink issues?”) or have Bucky complete tasks (“Open the vents for me?”) as if just remembering he wasn’t alone in the room. For his part, Bucky answered perfunctorily, did as he was instructed.

Mostly, Stark put on a show, one Bucky was happy to sit quietly and appreciate, until finally they were seated opposite each other, Tony cradling the arm, dictating notes to JARVIS as he got up close and personal to examine with his eyes and hands.

Calloused fingers traced along the interior of Bucky’s forearm, from his wrist to the crook of his elbow, a touch that had nothing to do with the work at hand, and everything to do with reverence. For all he knew, Stark had forgotten there was a person attached to the bit of technology he was admiring, but regardless, something in that caress was like the pulling of a trigger.

“Most of the time, the flesh arm feels like the fake.” Bucky suddenly had all of Stark’s considerable attention, and was unable to stop himself from continuing. “I like this one better. It… has purpose, a clearly defined function.”

Tony might have blinked at this, but there was no pity, no, “oh, you poor broken thing, what have they made you believe?” look in his eyes. They were just watching him with an intensity that should have been troubling, intelligent brown eyes searching for something.

After a moment, Tony sat up a little straighter on his stool, as if pieces of a puzzle had clicked into place for him, fingers sliding back down the arm to curl loosely around Bucky’s wrist, as if he was reluctant to break physical contact.

“Guessing you’ve never told anyone that, huh?”
Bucky shook his head. “Steve wants me to cut my hair,” was all he said, as if that made sense, somehow explained anything he was thinking, or feeling.

The strangest thing was, though, Stark nodded, his mouth quirked up to one side as if there was a bad taste in his mouth. He looked, somehow, impossibly, as if he knew exactly what Bucky had meant.

“That’s Steve’s shit to deal with, don’t worry about it.” Tony finally let go of his wrist, looking Bucky up and down as if truly seeing him for the first time. Before he spoke again, he made sure Bucky was looking him in the eyes. “Me? I’d never wear sleeves if I had your arm. It’s fucking gorgeous.”

A quiet huff of relieved laughter pushed its way past Bucky’s lips. He watched Stark hop off of the stool and begin pulling images out of the thin air again, the strange intensity of the moment passing.

“Your power source is for shit, though, so we’re gonna have to fix that,” Tony announced, shooting a thousand watt smile at Bucky.

Impossibly, Bucky smiled back.
Upgrades

Chapter Summary

Bruce & Tony & Bucky, oh my! Time for the science bros to investigate Bucky's arm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the sixth morning in a row, Bucky awoke to find his name waiting for him, curled around his tongue, trapped behind lips, and teeth. It left his chest feeling tight, his head packed full of disjointed memories meant to keep the name company. They lacked constancy, as did the name, and so he could not trust them, much as he could not trust anything anymore.

Motionless in the bed, waiting for the reflexive urge to scream to pass, he found himself reassured by the undercurrent of awareness he could sense around him, which was granted tangibility through the low grade hum he associated with the disembodied voice of JARVIS.

He had noticed the sound immediately upon entering the Tower, but said nothing, concerned that no one else could hear it. If that was the case, the sound, and the strange sense of awareness connected to it, would drive him mad. Better to not know.

Although his exploration of the premises had been limited at best, he’d been unable to find an area without the hum. There were, however, some areas where it was louder, such as Stark’s workshop, which, appropriately enough, was where he learned that he was not imagining things in the first place.

Something about that space, or the man inhabiting it, loosened his tongue. Since Stark hadn’t reacted badly to Bucky’s confession about his arm, it had felt safe enough answering truthfully when twenty or so minutes later, Stark asked, “You okay over there? You’ve got this sort of panicked, squirrely look on your face.”

“The hum I hear in the building.” Having been down there for some time watching Stark work, the calming voice of JARVIS nicely balancing out Tony’s more enthusiastic contributions, Bucky had developed a theory. “Is that JARVIS?”

Strange, how a face, a body, could be so expressive. Stark straightened up on his stool, eyes widening, as the pleasure Bucky had somehow given him through his words worked its magic on the man, transforming him until he was practically radiating joy.

Trying to summon up a memory, any memory at all, of experiencing what he saw on Stark’s face left Bucky’s head hurting, and his mouth dry. His muscles tensed involuntarily with phantom pain (“Then wipe him.”) as he thought of the chair. There was a moment right as the procedure finished and the machinery released its hold, where the physical pain ceased (muscles slacken, his jaw relaxes, the rubber guard can be taken from his mouth), and the people around him had yet to disturb the placidity of his mind. If the memory was in any way accurate, could that state qualify as happiness?

“Yes, it is, and thank you for noticing,” Stark said, spinning his chair in a circle, pulling Bucky out of
his own thoughts in the process. “I’ve been waiting for someone to mention it—well, bitch about it, anyway—although I bet Steve’s too polite. Our Capsicle seems the sort to keep complaints to himself, even if it’s driving his super serum ears batty.” His eyebrows crept closer to his hairline as he added, “Which, oh, is it bothering you? It’s probably bothering you…”

Bucky gave a little shake of his head, surprised when the gesture managed to bring an abrupt end to Stark’s rambling. Gathering his words carefully, he said, “It’s nice.” He worried at his lip a moment, and felt his brow furrow. “Consistent,” he clarified, watching the joy flow back across Stark’s face.

Once reassured that what he had been hearing was real, Bucky found himself growing to appreciate the sound more with each day that passed. In some ways, it had become a lifeline, something he could count upon, whether he remembered his name or not.

“Good morning, JARVIS.”

“Good morning, sir. Are you ready to begin the day?”

Bucky licked his lips, and cleared his throat, eyes open but unfocused. “I am James Buchanan Barnes,” he said to the ceiling. After a moment’s consideration, he added. “Bucky.”

“Very good, sir. Captain Rogers has inquired as to whether you would like to join him for breakfast this morning.”

With speed and fluidity, Bucky excited the bed, and headed for the bathroom. Although he was naked, for a moment he felt the familiar weight of his weapons, and needed to pause before arriving at his destination. By the time he looked down at himself, the sensation had faded, but his heart carried on its fitful hammering, even as he forced himself to continue on with purpose.

He reminded himself that the eyes he saw reflected in the mirror did not belong to an asset, they belonged to a man. “Bucky,” he said again, watching his mouth form the word. “James,” he tried, but it felt the same. Empty.

“Sir, might I trouble you for an answer regarding the Captain’s offer?”

The face in the mirror was blank. “I accept.”

“Very well,” JARVIS intoned. “You will find him waiting for you in the communal kitchen.”

Bucky watched himself blink, and studied the steady rise and fall of his chest as he brushed his teeth. Once this task was complete, he returned to the bedroom in order to dress. There were too many choices, and it made him uncomfortable, seeing it all there waiting for him when he pulled open the drawers.

Steve was also waiting, though, and so Bucky forced himself to grab items quickly, pulling them on without looking at them, an unsettled feeling in his stomach. Everything they’d given him seemed too soft, flimsy, left him vulnerable.

He took a deep breath before opening the door of his suite, eyeing the pristine, empty kitchen before heading out. If Bucky had been given one, it was reasonable to assume all of the Avengers had as well, and yet they seemed to eat exclusively on the communal floor, whenever they were actually home.

Sure enough, as soon as the elevator doors opened, Bucky could hear that Steve was not alone. He headed in anyway, even if he’d rather have returned to his rooms. Weakness was unacceptable, and preferences were meaningless.
“Hey,” Steve said, smiling as he caught sight of Bucky. The expression made him look younger (*he should be smaller, shouldn’t he*?), and Bucky swallowed around the lump in his throat. “Bruce made waffles this morning, didn’t think you’d want to miss out.”

There was an empty seat beside Steve, and there was that disconnect in action again, because Bucky’s first thought was to wonder who they had saved a seat for, even as he realized it was for him.

He could feel them carefully not watching him as he cautiously rounded the table, and sat down, his movements as efficient and non threatening as possible. Almost immediately, there was a warm, reassuring hand resting against his arm; he fought the instinct to tense, to shake off the contact, remained still, chin tucked low so his hair would fall forward.

The conversation hadn’t ceased, but the rhythm had been altered by his arrival. Thor was absent, but Clint and Natasha were there, exchanging sections of a newspaper. Bruce placed a plate of waffles in front of Bucky before returning to his seat on Bucky’s left. Seated (*if you could call it that*) on Steve’s right, Tony was slumped onto the table, a hand curled around a steaming cup of coffee, his eyes closed.

Steve began slicing his waffles into neat little squares, butter and syrup piled on top. Bucky waited until Steve placed the first bite into his mouth before he picked up his own knife and fork, and followed suit, foregoing any additions.

Most of what he had eaten since arriving at the Tower had felt alien to him. Too flavorful, the textures and ingredients unfamiliar. Because of his lack of enthusiasm, he suspected Steve was convinced he’d starve if not supervised while eating.

“Hey, Barnes,” Tony said, his eyes still closed, the words muffled because of his face being smashed into the table. “Steve’s made me lose the will to live over here. Care to help me out by settling an argument?”

“Tony,” Steve warned.

“No, *Steve*,” he replied, sitting upright. Bucky could now see that the other coffee, the one he’d incorrectly assumed was Clint’s, was also Tony’s. “I kind of think this is a free will, basic right to choice situation, so I’m going to do what we should have done days ago, and ask him what he wants to do.”

It was clear that Bucky wasn’t the only one uncomfortable with the rising tension in the room. Steve’s knuckles were white where they gripped his fork, while Tony’s entire expression seemed to say, “give me an excuse to make a scene.”

“He’s right, actually,” and it was strange how such a soft, respectful voice could command so much attention. Suddenly, all eyes were on Bruce, and he chewed his mouthful of food almost sheepishly before turning to face Bucky. “Tony and I have been discussing your arm.”


“You’re twisting my words again,” Steve said, exasperated.

“Am I?” Tony asked, face scrunched up as he took a sip from each of his mugs in turn.

“I didn’t accuse you of anything, Tony,” Steve insisted, as Tony continued talking right over him,
turning to the others. “Nat, Clint, care to chime in?”

“I’m just enjoying the show,” Natasha answered with a sweet smile.

“Can’t really blame Cap for being creeped out, Stark. You do get a science boner whenever you’re talking about Barnes’s arm.”

Tony sputtered, his cheeks suspiciously pink, so before he could launch into another rant, Bucky opted for getting his information from someone less emotionally involved. “JARVIS,” and suddenly all eyes were on him, “a little help here?”

“The primary power source for you bionic arm is currently at 36% capacity and falling. Based on current data points, and barring increased usage of certain functions, a full loss of power is expected within the next fifteen days.”

Bucky tensed as if he had been struck, the smell and lingering taste of the food suddenly making him feel sick to his stomach. “Can you fix it?”

Tony leaned forward until he was practically on top of Steve, and with a sigh of irritation, Steve shifted back in his seat, attempting to regain some of his personal space.

“HYDRA specifically inserted points of failure, along with a battery life I wouldn’t accept from my phone,” he explained, sloshing some of his coffee when he went to gesture with the hand still holding a mug.

“C’mon,” Steve groaned, eyeing his breakfast with desperation. He placed a finger against Stark’s forehead and pushed him out of the way, then hunched over his plate so he could eat, and Tony could still have a clear line of sight while talking to Bucky.

Tony sheepishly used a napkin to clean up the puddle of coffee he’d left beside Steve’s plate, then leaned on Steve’s back as he resumed his explanation.

“Standard operating procedure was to put you back on ice at regular intervals, due to the instability of the memory wipes, so for them, it was a non issue. They could just recharge while you were in cold storage.”

Stark’s choice of words had left Steve muttering something about sensitivity training under his breath, but Bucky didn’t particularly care. It was the truth, after all. “So you need to recharge me?”

“I can do that in a pinch,” Tony explained, and some of the tension in Bucky’s chest lessened. “But I’d rather upgrade you to a sustainable power source. In order to do that, I need data, which means I need you. Or, well, we need you, cause Brucie here has to help with this one, due to the whole flesh and blood factor.”

When Bucky turned, Bruce was smiling gently at him. “It’s entirely non invasive by design,” he explained, “but it will mean spending hours, if not days, tethered to machinery while we take readings. Hopefully by the end we’ll know enough for Tony to be in a position to make his upgrades safely.”

“They’re right,” Steve said, shifting upright again in order to face Bucky. “This is your choice. From what Tony was saying, it sounds like it doesn’t even have to be one or the other.”

“Our fearless leader is correct,” Tony agreed, standing up. He held up the mug in his right hand, and took a sip before saying, “Option one, I install a charging station in your suite. It’ll take about 39 hours, including time for fabrication, and installation.”
He held up the left mug, sipped again. “The potential power source replacement approach can happen whenever, assuming Bruce and I are both still fully operational geniuses with nearly unlimited resources at our disposal whenever whenever rolls around.”

Tony grabbed the untouched cup of coffee that had been set out for Bucky, topped it off with the dregs from his other two mugs, and drained about half of it in one rapid swallow. “Me? I suck at waiting. Considering I’m one of maybe five people on the planet actually good at multitasking, I say we do all of it at the same time.”

Bucky glanced at Bruce, then took note of the concern on Steve’s face, before ultimately settling on Tony, meeting his bright, eager eyes head on. “When do we start?”

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“Are you seeing this?” Tony mumbled, worrying at his thumbnail with his teeth. “Please tell me I didn’t finally manage to overdose on caffeine, and this is all some beautiful hallucination. I’m actually stroking out, right?”

“I see it,” Bruce assured him softly. “I definitely see it.”

They were standing shoulder to shoulder, hunched over a display, heads practically touching. From across the room, Bucky watched them impassively.

“J, got enough to work with now?”

“Of course, sir.”

Bucky blinked as several 3D holographic representations of himself sprang out of nothingness. Bruce and Tony whirled around to peer at the blown up visualization of Bucky’s brain, momentarily ignoring the various full body, and arm specific views.

“This is something else,” Bruce murmured, adjusting his glasses.

“Okay, basics first, yeah?” Tony pulled and tugged at the blue wireframe version of the bionic arm before asking, “Barnes, how do you open the vents?”

Bucky shifted his focus, and found Tony now staring at him expectantly. The question didn’t make sense, because he wasn’t sure how to explain something that just was.

“How do you open your mouth?” Both men grinned at the response.

“How do you open your mouth?” Both men grinned at the response.

“Okay, stupid question, right, let me try again. Are there specific physical actions you’re required to perform in order to open the vents, or do you just,” he rolled his hands in a circle, fingers fanning out gracefully, “open them.”

Bucky frowned, and shifted in his seat. He glanced at the holographic displays, ignoring the tendrils of wire, and the little electrodes connecting him to the computers nearby, and stretched out his arm. The movement caused various sections of his “brain” to light up, fascinating bursts of color and light.

When Bucky opened the vents, Tony gasped with delight, and grabbed hold of Bruce. “Fuck me.”

“Answer is still no,” Bruce replied absently. He was as enraptured by the display as Tony. “It’s as if… But that makes no sense.”
“No, no, you’re right,” Tony insisted, “in fact, hey, flex the muscles in your right arm for me?”

Bucky did as was asked. There was another reaction in the display, and although the same sections lit up, the color combinations were different, less vibrant.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony exclaimed. He tore his eyes away from the display, and walked over to join Bucky, standing close enough that Bucky could smell the lingering traces of his aftershave.

“Hey, remember that thing you told me?” he asked, keeping his voice low so they wouldn’t be overheard by Bruce. He glanced over his shoulder, then met Bucky’s eyes. “There’s a reason this arm feels more real to you,” he explained. “I have no idea how, but they’ve essentially hijacked both your efferent and afferent neural pathways in order to give the arm VIP preferential treatment.”

Bucky licked his lips, and watched as Tony walked back over to the holographic brain. “Okay, say you’re listening to the baseball game on a little transistor radio, and then someone drives by listening to the same game, only through the radio in their car, with the volume blasted.” He exploded the view of Bucky’s brain, staring at it in wonder. “You’re still hearing the game, but the car stereo is drowning out your little radio until it drives off.”

“That’s actually not what,” Bruce began, but then shook his head, and shrugged his shoulders, deciding against finishing the sentence. “The arm is lightyears beyond anything we’ve seen in prosthetics; they’ve effectively made it more real to your body than your actual arm.”

Bucky looked down at his hands, frowning. “Could…” he bit down into his lower lip, and let his words wither on the vine.

“Hey, this is all part of Operation Free Will,” Tony reminded him, ducking his head a bit so he could see Bucky’s face around the curtain of hair in the way. “Could what? Ask away, seriously.”

“The fingertips,” Bucky said, staring down at them, before dragging the metal fingers across the too soft fabric of his pants. This time, there was hardly any display of color to be seen, and Tony made a little noise of understanding, while Bruce frowned, and shook his head.

“Guessing they didn’t see a point,” Tony murmured, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Well, theoretically, if we can figure out the hot wiring, we can improve the tactile feedback in your fingertips.”

“Theoretically,” Bruce emphasized, his face pensive.

They stood side by side quietly for a moment, Tony’s hands interlaced behind his head, the fabric of his t-shirt stretched thin across his chest. Through the material, a bright blue glow could be seen, along with the outline of something rigid, and out of place in the center of his chest.

Perhaps sensing Bucky watching him, Tony glanced over, a tight smile on his face. “Anyone bother to fill you in on my souvenir?”

This wasn’t the first time Bucky had noticed the object. “Steve told me it lets you power the Iron Man suit.”

Beside Tony, Bruce’s expression clouded over, his eyes lowering as Stark yanked his shirt up to reveal the glowing object Steve had told him was called an arc reactor. It was beautiful, and fascinating, and surrounded by scar tissue, the sort he saw every morning when standing in front of the mirror.

“Sure, focus on the fun part,” Tony muttered before letting his shirt fall back into place.
“It’s deeper than it looks, isn’t it?”

Stark wore a strange, hesitant expression on his face, his silence answer enough. Bucky wondered if anyone had asked before, and if it was wrong of him to have done so. He didn’t exactly have a lot of people that had first hand experience with something along these lines, and so he was interested. Talking about the arm didn’t bother him, it was everything it had been used to accomplish that left him feeling hollowed out, much as Stark’s chest had been (had they left any of his sternum behind? did he have trouble breathing?) to accommodate the arc reactor.

“I can remember the saw,” Bucky explained, gesturing to his arm, hoping Stark would get where he was coming from, “cutting away the excess.”

Bruce removed his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose, which caused Tony to turn and place a comforting hand on his shoulder. “We good?” he asked softly, and although his jaw was tight, Bruce nodded.

He wasn’t sure why his words had caused such a reaction, and wishing to soften them, Bucky shrugged, said, “My memories change sometimes, so maybe I’m wrong.”

“We’ve read Zola’s project files.” Bruce’s calm sounded forced. “That one is accurate.”

Smiling actually hurt, because his lips were chapped, and unaccustomed to the movement. His tongue darted out, tasted blood, but the smile did not slip. That the things done to him (by him) were documented was something that had never occurred to Bucky. He’d assumed anything and everything related to the project would have been purged.

“Hey.”

Tony approached him slowly, his eyes warm with concern. Bucky exhaled shakily, and watched the strange new light show unfolding across his brain, visible over Stark’s shoulder. It was distracting, especially seeing the (unexpected) reaction that transpired in response to Tony touching him, one of his hands settling onto Bucky’s shoulder, fingers covering the red star.

“Do you need to stop? We can stop,” he offered.

Bucky shook his head, and it was then that he realized there were tears on his face. The smile slipped away, replaced with confusion as he brushed them aside. “How do I access the files?”

“Oh,” Tony looked over his shoulder, he and Bruce exchanging some sort of silent communication on the issue before he faced Bucky again. “Not sure that’s a great idea.”

Tilting his head defiantly, Bucky threw Stark’s words back in his face. “What happened to Operation Free Will?” Tony’s mouth opened only to close again, his brows furrowing as he grimaced. “I can’t trust anything in my head right now. Being able to confirm or deny would be…” He took a ragged breath, pleaded with his eyes, before deciding actually saying it couldn’t hurt. “Please?”

“Shit,” Stark said, pulling his hand away in order to run it over his face.

“Steve,” Bruce began, but Tony talked over him, finishing the sentence with, “will probably kill me, yes, but James has a point, doesn’t he?”

The holographic display fluctuated, colorful bursts showing his changing emotional state in real time, and he wondered if the shift he saw was from Tony calling him James, or because it seemed like Stark was actually going to give him what he’d asked for. Was that what hope looked like?
Tony stared beseechingly at Bruce, who looked like he’d rather be just about anywhere else. “Any psychiatrist would have serious concerns about what you’re suggesting,” he answered carefully. “You could set back your progress, or…”

“Operation Free Will,” Tony countered, gesturing to Bucky. “He either has a right to make decisions for himself, or he doesn’t, right? Shouldn’t it be his choice?”

“Tony, without a doubt, this will have serious psychological ramifications.” Bruce shook his head again, hands twisting at his glasses until Bucky thought they’d snap. "Bucky, the files are by no means comprehensive. Relying upon them...

"Anything is better than this!" Bucky interrupted, pounding the metal fist against his chest. In the center of the room, his holographic vitals were going wild, a beautiful visual representation of his agony. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, his voice dropping back into its customary monotone when he spoke again. "Six days. Six days in a row of being able to remember my name when I wake up, that’s my record."

"You won't find the answer to who you are in these files," Bruce insisted, "only what they were trying to turn you into."

Tony touched him again, and it should have felt oppressive, or weighty (Steve's hand, warm and wishing to be comforting, but he isn't touching his friend. He’s touching a hollow construct, forcing together pieces that don’t fit, trying to fill the shell with the life of someone named James Buchanan Barnes, but that isn’t him, not anymore.) but instead it felt like Tony’s hand was keeping him from flying apart at the seams.

The lightshow shifted again as his heart rate began to slow, and it was clear from the change in Stark’s expression as he studied the display that he’d noticed the reaction taking place. He adjusted his position so he didn’t have to look over his shoulder when speaking with Bruce, but he stayed close, his hand never leaving Bucky’s shoulder.

"I understand losing your identity," Bruce's voice was the epitome of regret. "The guilt that comes with hurting people. Killing them."

"Hey, Brucie-bear, don’t go there." Tony said, "Look, guys, this doesn't have to be all or nothing, right? I’d like to propose a compromise, one which could help our friend James here, while simultaneously significantly decreasing the chances of Steve killing me. Well, killing me for this, anyway, I’m sure he has a whole list in his little notebook of Reasons To Off Tony Stark."

Bruce took a deep breath as he placed his glasses back on his face, something like relief in his eyes. Bucky wondered what kept Bruce up late at night, was beginning to wonder if anyone in the Tower
was really any better off than he was.

"What did you have in mind, Tony?"

"So, the lovely Dr. Banner is right, the files aren't complete, and more importantly, you can't rely on HYDRA paperwork to figure out who you are. I get where you're coming from, though, so, how 'bout this? When you find yourself remembering something, and want a little reassurance, ask JARVIS and he'll confirm or deny."

Bucky was relieved; as much as he was desperate to get his hands on the files, to know, he was also terrified to find out just how much blood was on his hands. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and shook his head in agreement. He could see the relief in Tony’s warm brown eyes, surprised to find the sympathy he saw there didn’t leave him feeling sick to his stomach.

“Let’s talk expectations. You’re going to remember things that aren’t in the files, but are very much real. Inability to verify based on current available data is only that. Right?” Bucky nodded. “Right, good, because Bruce is allergic to logical fallacies, breaks out in hives, the whole deal. Really ugly stuff.”

Bruce nodded, his mouth quirked up in a smile, one that Tony returned wholeheartedly. “I do hate logical fallacies.”

“So, expectations, covered! On to terms and conditions. In order to give you access by proxy, I need your consent to allow JARVIS to report back any adverse reactions. You’ve got a head full of landmines, and I have enough shit to keep me up at night—the last thing I need is to be inadvertently responsible for you blowing your metaphorical legs off.”

Bucky worried at his lower lip, weighing the pros and cons. “Who gets notified?”

“Good question. That’s up to you. We’re not always around at the same time, so your best bet is ranking by preference. If your first choice isn’t available at the time, JARVIS moves down the list. If no one is around, I guess we try remote contact? We’ll figure it out.”

That was a bit more reassuring. As much as Steve wanted to help him, Bucky was uncomfortable with the idea of falling apart in front of him, wasn’t sure how he felt about Steve having seen the files, even.

“Okay.”

Tony clapped his hands together, and grinned, and Bucky missed the physical contact, despite himself. “Since I’m a businessman at heart, I can’t stop there. Even if there is no measurable adverse reaction, I want you to talk to us about what you’re remembering, especially if JARVIS is unable to confirm the memory for you.”
Bucky’s displeasure must have been evident on his face, because suddenly the hand was back on his shoulder.

“I know. Clint and I regularly compete for the title of Biggest Asshole in the Tower; Natasha is intimidating as hell; Bruce’s brilliance shines like the sun; Thor is… Thor; and Steve is such a genuinely good person that it actually makes your teeth hurt sometimes. The thing is, we’ve all got blood on our hands, been through hell in one way or another, and come out the other side still fighting. No one is going to judge you. There are people here, Clint especially, that you’re really going to want to talk to at some point, because believe it or not, we can help. So, that’s my last condition. If I give you access, you have to let us help you. Okay?”

Bucky stared down at his hands where they rested on his lap, palms up, flesh and metal side by side. It was tempting to rip the electrodes and wires from his body, storm out of the room, return to solitude. It was compelling, but deep in his gut he knew it was cowardice, and worse yet, it wasn’t going to get him any answers.

If he’d wanted to, he could have continued evading Steve, remained hidden, but he hadn’t. He’d let himself be found, allowed Steve to bring him back to the Tower, and not so he’d have a place to live. Despite everything, he wanted to believe there was a light at the end of the tunnel, some way out of the nightmare he was trapped in. He might not be James Buchanan Barnes any longer, but he could be somebody.

Looking up, he found Tony was still watching him, so he answered; in a lot of ways it was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Tony repeated, a smile lighting up his face. “I’ll fill everyone in, don’t worry about that, and in case you haven’t noticed yet, I don’t exactly keep normal hours, so no trying to use that as an excuse to keep to yourself. JARVIS can let you know where people are, and if they’re up or not, the whole shebang.”

Bucky nodded, surprised to feel the ever present weight in his chest lighten, just a bit. Just enough to make a difference. Tony must have seen it in his eyes, because he nodded, suddenly all seriousness, and said softly enough for only Bucky to hear, “It gets better, James.”

And that was that. Stark spun on his heels, snapping his fingers. “JARVIS, you know what to do.”

“Of course, sir.”

Suddenly, whatever tension remained in the room was forced out by the sound of loud, electric guitars. Bruce was smiling and shaking his head, and Bucky couldn’t help but do the same as he watched Tony dance his way across the room.

“Prick up your ears, James, this is The Clash,” he said, grinning as he watched the holographic representation of Bucky’s brain shift and change in response to the music. “Learn them, love them. Which reminds me, JARVIS?”

“Already ahead of you, sir. Sergeant Barnes has been given full access to your music library, and I have crafted several playlists for him to begin with, based upon your own listening habits.”

“Daddy loves you,” Tony said, smiling with pride. “Now, back to science!”

“You’re not allowed to have any more coffee,” Bruce said with a sigh, although he was smiling.

Bucky watched them, and let Tony’s words run through his mind over and over again. Maybe, just maybe, he was right. Maybe it would get better. And so he let go, just a little, let everything else—the
guilt, and pain, and panic, and confusion—retreat into the background, let the strange music wash over him, and began considering the order of Avengers for his contact list.

Tony Stark
Steve Rogers
Bruce Banner
Natasha Romanov
Clint Barton
Thor Odinson

Chapter End Notes

Ooops, I was supposed to post the hair cut installment (which has more Natasha!), and write some fun in the kitchen with the guys, but this happened instead. I suddenly had a LOT of Bucky feels, and had to purge the brain. A pervy part of me wants Tony to hook Bucky back up after they're a couple, and get sexy with him while watching the brain readouts, heh heh heh.

BTW, if I was to write an Avengers karaoke outing, what songs do you imagine people would sing? Looking for recommendations / headcanon. ;)
As if on instinct, upon waking from his night terror, Bucky found himself slipping through the
darkness of the tower with only one destination in mind, as if somehow pulled by the memory of
dirty, calloused fingers curled possessively around his bionic wrist. It wasn’t until he was almost
there that it occurred to him that Tony might be asleep, or otherwise occupied.

“Is he awake?”

“Sir is expecting you,” JARVIS answered, and Bucky bit back the sudden flood of appreciation that
threatened to leave him weeping in the hallway.

Sure enough, Tony was there in the workshop, looking almost bored, or as if Bucky had been
expected hours earlier and was running late. There was no comment made about his bare feet, the
sweat soaked tank top, the wrinkled pajama pants, or the tangled mess of hair pulled back into a
ponytail. Stark just continued to spin in his chair, tossing something spherical up into the air and
catching it.

“You really were expecting me.”

It wasn’t a question, and Tony didn’t treat it as such, one shoulder twitching up in a half shrug, as if
to say, of course, trying to project relaxed indifference, even as his eyes narrowed. Something in the
assessing look made the hairs on the back of Bucky’s neck rise away from his skin, a shudder
running through him, his heart beating the staccato rhythm; run, run, run!

“Hey, no, stick around,” Tony said (he had the oddest feeling Tony had heard his thoughts) rising
from his seat, expression suddenly soft around the edges.

Bucky stopped backing out of the room. Tony chucked the ball he had been playing with, and
Barnes snatched it from the air before it could hit him in the face, twitching at the sound of the hard
plastic smacking against his metallic palm.

“Sleep is overrated, I always say that, ask anyone. Ask JARVIS.”

“Sir is exceptionally skilled at avoiding sleep,” and for some reason the put upon disembodied voice
of JARVIS was soothing, far more soothing than it had any right to be. Something heard between
the words, writ in the dark circles under Tony’s eyes made Bucky feel like he was in the right place
afterall. “Might I add, this does not negate the value of one pursuing this worthy endeavor.”

“Hey, I do some of my best work when sleep deprived, so,” Tony paused to stretch, working the
kinks out of his neck, then refocused on Bucky. “So what sort of stuff gets you screaming in the
night?”

Bucky flinched, but Stark was holding his hands up expectantly, waiting for the ball to be thrown
back. For one long moment, Bucky had to fight the urge to crush the ball in his hand, but the
moment passed, and he lobbed it back to Stark instead, putting a bit more heat behind it than
necessary.

Tony pulled a face at him, somewhere between friendly and taunting. “Sorry, was I supposed to
pretend that we’re just two normal, well adjusted guys?”

“Falling.” Bucky didn’t bother to catch the ball when it was thrown back to him. It rolled across the
floor after bouncing harmlessly off of his chest, sounding impossibly loud; the customary abrasive
music was missing from the workshop for some reason. “Steve’s face, and falling.”

And he could feel it again, spinning out into the void, the rush of air around him, unable even to breathe, knowing it was over, thinking maybe it was better that way (no more pretending), dying some kind of hero. Of course this would be one of the memories to actually survive. He’d hardly had time for final thoughts, or the whole life flashing before his eyes thing. Just enough time to think of Steve, to hope he’d get through the war, have a good life.

“So, why aren’t you talking to Steve? Pretty sure the same thing wakes him up in the middle of the night.”

It should be insulting, or feel like he’s been told to leave, but Tony just sounds curious. Bucky shrugged again, biting into his trembling lower lip in an attempt to stop the awful scream building up somewhere in his chest. It’s rattling around in there, something caged and angry and unsafe.

He should, he knew he should. He should be wrapped up in Steve’s arms, letting him know he’d never blamed him, not for any of it, and he was so fucking grateful to have him as a friend. The only problem was, he was convinced a lot of these feelings (a head snaps back, a burst of blood in the air, clear the casing, load and chamber the round, seek the next target) of shame, of complicity, of betrayal, of irrevocable contamination predated becoming the Winter Soldier.

“I don’t… recognize my own face some mornings,” he eventually answered, voice flat and empty, despite the way his mouth trembled. “Other times, I remember too much.”

The fingers of a deadman creaked when you pried loose the gun they were still holding, but you needed it to stay alive a little longer, whispering an apology, blood and stink everywhere, and he can’t help but notice the enemy they’re fighting is them, its just them speaking a different language. Sons and fathers and brothers and friends and a head snaps back and blood sprays like pollen in the air...

“Steve looks at me like he knows me, but he’s looking in the wrong place.”

The silence stretched out between them, Bucky staring at a spot on the wall just beyond Tony, unwilling to look, not wanting to see what might be written across the features of his handsome face. He could hear the little tap tap tap as Tony’s fingers drummed against the arc reactor, though, the sound already familiar to Barnes.

“Maybe,” Stark finally said. “Maybe not. Cap has a way of seeing what we’re unable to in ourselves.”

“Cap,” Bucky huffed, disliking the way his teeth ground together against the word, the strange anger churning up his guts. He still has a lot of conflicted feelings surrounding Captain America.

Tony was standing in front of him, then, and it seemed strange that Bucky didn’t have to physically look up at him, because the man feels large, larger than life, especially in the workshop. There was an odd compulsion to sit down, or drop to one knee, to fix the imbalance, somehow, because Tony should be taller than him, and Steve should be shorter.

“It feels backwards,” he heard himself say, and it sounded like a question. “He used to be a lot shorter, you know.”

“Yeah,” Tony drawled, somehow able to follow along, and Bucky allowed himself to be led over to a couch. Sitting was better, although the urge remained to tip his head in supplication, to bite down into the mouth guard. “Guessing that’s weird, suddenly having to look up to your best friend.”
“I always looked up to him.”

Tony’s eyes were very brown, his lashes long and dark, and Bucky thought of Howard, and felt the anger twist again, a knife in his side, carving him up so that everything good left inside of him spilled out onto the floor in a hot rush.

“Your father,” he began, but then its as if his anger had been handed off to Tony like a baton in a race (who can explode the fastest?). Whatever else he was going to say fizzled out, and instead he said, “They shouldn’t have done that to Stevie.”

“There’s a lot he shouldn’t have done,” Tony snapped, and Bucky remembered the warning Steve had given him, feeling like he’s stranded in a field laced with landmines.

He waited to be escorted out of the workshop, but Tony just got up and began rearranging some tools, everything about him exuding a false sense of relaxation. Bucky wondered how much fun it wasn’t growing up with Howard Stark as your father.

“Falling, huh,” Tony said, and Bucky blinked, unable to ignore the sharpness in Stark’s eyes. “I’ve had those. Well, not those, not a train, a train would be good—if a Stark is going to fall, he has to fall. Big, with style, you know? Like through a wormhole in space.”

Bucky attempted to process this (he’ll have to ask JARVIS what the hell Tony is talking about later), tried his anger back on, but is simply appreciative for the fact that Tony isn’t trying to hold his hand, and help him through the pain, but is sort of… Well, it almost feels like he’s being one-upped. It reminded him of something he couldn’t quite actually remember, but that might have been part of his life, once upon a time. It felt like brothers, like friends, like something he desperately needed.

“I had style. They waited until I landed before brainwashing it out of me.”

To his surprise, Tony grinned, wild and unbalanced, and Bucky thought again of JARVIS’s barb regarding sleep and the avoidance of it. Wondered how long Tony has been awake, how long hiding from sleep has been normal for this man.

“Hey, at least they knew how to accessorize,” Tony said, gesturing to the arm. “I woke up hooked to a car battery, and had to build my own in a cave.”

Bucky watched Tony’s fingers drumming against the blue glow of the arc reactor once more, added another mental Note for JARVIS to his list, and slouched back against the couch, feeling relaxed for no reason whatsoever.

“I’m betting you were too much of a pain in the ass, and they let you escape just to get rid of you,” he heard himself saying, and decided that he liked the way Stark’s eyes shone when he was trying to hold back laughter. “I was like the good china; brought out for special occasions, then wiped clean, and put away.”

“You are awfully special,” Tony drawled, looking him up and down as if trying to decide where to begin licking first, and Bucky wondered if Stark ever flirted like this with Steve, and how that went over. Blushing, probably a lot of blushing. “All the best assassins are pretty and speak Russian. I’m picturing you with red hair, now. Spoiler alert: not a good look on you, James.”

“What is a good look, Antoshka?”

There was a drawn out moment where he could actually hear Tony’s reflexive easy answer (“Me.”) as if he’s said it, but instead Stark tilted his head a bit, his smile shifting into something else entirely, a sort of gentle, affectionate assessment. Bucky was instantaneously awash with concern, and unsure
why.

“I like that. Diminutive of Anton? Steve doesn’t speak Russian, by the way.”

Bucky’s heart hammered in his ears, and then he was on his feet and standing in front of Stark, not sure when or how that happened. Tony had a hand up in the air, palm out, reminiscent of Iron Man preparing to use a repulsor blast, yet there was nothing that felt like a threat within the gesture. It was probably habit more than anything, and Bucky stilled, even though he was desperate to bolt from the room.

“I only mention it since I do, and also because I’m pretty sure you’re unaware of the fact that you have been, since coming down here.”

There was a (terrifyingly comforting in its awfulness) sense of cold gripping him, but then Tony’s hand was on his shoulder, not to keep him from running, but to serve as an anchor, something to allow him to stabilize himself. And so he reached back, the metal shining, his arm flush against Tony’s, and thought of the red star currently peeking out from beneath the engineer’s hand.

“I had this anxiety disorder—maybe had is an exaggeration, it’s better, at least—and it sucked. Sucks. The whole meltdown freakout, totally lame, embarrassing and awful, so this speaking Russian thing? Really not a big deal.”

“No?” Bucky watched his fingers as they bunched up a fistful of the fabric of Tony’s shirt. Stark’s eyes were still the same, though, unafraid, and compassionate in a way that had nothing to do with pity.

“Nope, just… Steve, he worries,” Tony continued. “He might read more into it than is really there.”

Bucky wasn’t sure how long they stood there, but at some point his breathing sounded less like he was about to begin sobbing, his heart was steady in his chest, and his fingers released their grip.

“Sergeant Barnes, might I use this as an opportunity to more formally offer up my services?”

JARVIS interrupted.

There was an awkwardness in the moment when Bucky had to make himself stop touching Stark, take a few steps back. Tony suddenly took issue with something one of his bots was doing, and was across the room, scolding, an obvious (appreciated) attempt to allow Bucky to converse with JARVIS in relative privacy.

“That, uh… sure?”

“I’m rather experienced in helping persons reacclimate themselves upon waking from a troubled sleep,” JARVIS explained. “As well as recognizing symptoms of anxiety when they present.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.” Bucky ran a hand over his face, feeling the exhaustion creeping back in around the edges. “Maybe let me know if I’m speaking Russian to anyone other than Tony, or Natasha?”

“Certainly sir. Might I also suggest some relaxation techniques? They may be of great benefit to you.”

“Sure.”

Bucky found himself slowly walking to the door, keeping up a steady stream of conversation with JARVIS as he made his way out, but then looked back over his shoulder. Tony was purposefully not watching him go, looking oddly dwarfed by the workshop somehow.
“Hey, Antoshka,” he called, and Tony glanced over his shoulder. “I’m not going to be able to sleep right now. Keep me company while I catch up on popular culture.”

He suspected that not making it a question was the correct approach, because a few minutes later Tony was leaving with him, rattling off suggestions for their viewing pleasure, and that felt much better than leaving alone.
Bucky had decided fairly early on that his favorite thing about the future was JARVIS. The AI had been so instrumental in his feeling comfortable in the Tower, had become such a part of his daily life, that Bucky incorrectly assumed that JARVIS would be accessible to him everywhere.

This bubble was rather rudely burst during his first post-Winter Soldier outing. Leaving the Tower in the first place had been stressful enough, even if it was something he (probably) should have done months earlier. That day in particular he hadn’t really been given a choice, as Steve, Sam and Clint dragged him (under protest) several blocks down the street to get coffee.

Coffee, it seemed, had changed a lot since his day, becoming an over complicated mess of imaginary words interspersed with actual Italian, which left him overwhelmed and out of his depth in about ten seconds flat.

Steve clapped him on the shoulder sympathetically. “I know, right?”

Bucky shook his head, and sighed. “Hey, JARVIS, where do I even start?”

Two paces ahead of him, Clint spun on his heels, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. Even before he erupted in laughter, Bucky knew he’d said something incredibly dense just from the way Steve’s hand tightened on his shoulder.

“Oh, oh god, did… did you just?” Clint gasped between fits of laughter, one arm clutching his stomach as if he was in pain.

“Allright, Clint,” Steve chided, and Bucky tensed up in response to the careful, apologetic tone he used next. “JARVIS is only in the tower, Buck. I’m sorry, I thought you knew.”

Bucky was pretty sure he said something in response, something like, “Right, thanks.” It was hard to remember precisely what it was he’d said, because he was too focused on not giving in to the impulse to smash Barton in the nose as he continued to howl with laughter.

Not surprisingly, Bucky all but shut down for the duration of their outing, quietly ordering a small black coffee, carefully copying what Steve had done when it was his turn to swipe a plastic card and sign the little machine. It seemed clunky and inelegant compared to what he had become used to in the Tower.

Sam and Steve tried to fill the silence with casual conversation, talk of what Sam had been up to, lots of hints dropped regarding attending one of his meetings. Barton’s conversational contributions consisted of interjecting with dick jokes whenever possible, but otherwise he was silent. Bucky kept his expression neutral, not wanting to let Clint see how much the (continued, in the form of occasional snorts and shakes of the head) laughter had bothered him.

Since entering the establishment, Bucky had kept track of every person’s movements, of their positions in the store if they remained, the direction they departed if they did not, and came to the conclusion that at least three of the people he’d observed so far were S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Two of them, a couple four tables over, had stuck around, while the third had positioned himself on the roof opposite the coffee shop.

Clearly, despite Steve’s talking it up as no big deal, S.H.I.E.L.D. was still reserving judgement where he was concerned. He couldn’t really blame them, since he was as skeptical as his worst critics when it came to the deprogramming debate. Still, part of him was tempted to head to the
bathroom and sneak out, if only to see how they’d respond (panic), but he stayed put, sipped his coffee like a good boy.

Sat, and counted off the time in his head, wondering how long they would have to stay out before it was considered a success. Thirty-six some minutes, and he was itching to get back home, maybe see if Barton was stupid enough to spar with him. Not that he’d actually try to hurt Clint; it’d just feel good to get a few jabs in.

When the fourth S.H.I.E.L.D. agent wandered in, Bucky slid his phone out of his pocket, and tapped out a message under the table.

*Please blow something up so I can come home, and I’ll bring you a big, big coffee.*

Less than forty seconds later, Steve and Clint were pulling out their own phones, frowning down at the screens. “Sorry, Buck, we’re gonna need to head back a little early.”

“Something wrong, Stevie?” he asked, overplaying his innocent tone if Steve’s arched eyebrow was any indication.

“Stark’s being all cryptic, but sounds like something went kabloomey,” Clint answered.

Bucky’s phone vibrated with Tony’s response. *Largest red eye they’ll give you. None of that foofoo shit either. I need it blacker than Fury’s twisted little heart.*

“Hey, Buck, c’mon,” Steve called, heading for the door. Bucky held his hand up as he dashed to the counter to get Tony’s coffee for him. He flashed his largest smile at the barista, which softened the blow when he explained he needed it on the double.

Tony was waiting for them when they got back to the Tower, leaning nonchalantly against a pillar in the lobby, absently fussing with the phone in his hand. “Hey guys, what’s up?”

“You tell me, you’re the one who called.” Steve was definitely suspicious, Bucky recognized his suspicious voice all too well.

“JARVIS, did you not understand that was supposed to be a test of the emergency Avengers broadcast system, in case of an actual assembling worthy emergency, yadda yadda yadda?”

“Terribly sorry, sir,” JARVIS responded sarcastically, and the mental image Bucky had of him in his head was rolling his eyes in Tony’s direction. “However did I misunderstand such a simple request?”

Bucky strode over to Tony, who waggled his eyebrows as he accepted the offering of coffee.

“Wait, so everything is cool?” Clint asked.

“Sure looks that way, sorry to bust up your knitting circle for nothing.” Tony headed for the elevators, while Steve made a noise of frustration. “Hey, Buckaroo Banzai, since you’re here and conveniently free, c’mon down and let me show you what Bruce and I came up with last night.”

Bucky felt guilty following Tony into the elevator, but also relieved, tried to soften the moment by giving Steve a genuine smile and a little wave as the elevator doors slide shut.

“Thanks, JARVIS,” Bucky said as soon as they were alone.

“My pleasure, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS answered, while Tony protested with, “Hey! I’m the one who orchestrated that great escape. Throw some love my way.”
Bucky tried and failed to smother his smile. “You were already rewarded. Try not to burn your mouth.”

At some point, Clint would tell Tony about Bucky’s little coffee shop mix up, but he had a feeling Tony would have his back when the time came. If anything, he should be flattered—he’d invented JARVIS, after all, and the fact that Bucky had assumed everyone would want a JARVIS of their very own said a lot about the quality of his work.

Yes, he had been planning on utilizing the highly advanced AI for something simple, like help with a coffee order, but that had nothing to do with why he adored JARVIS. Not only was he (much like Stark himself) very futuristic in that way Bucky had loved in the serials back in the day, he was also surprisingly compassionate, and easy to talk to (as was Tony).

When you couldn’t sleep at night, JARVIS would answer any stupid question you had, or read to you, or help you with learning modern slang so you’d be less likely to make an ass of yourself. When you woke up choking on tears, screaming in Russian, he reminded you of where and who and when you were, without ever sounding pitying, or alarmed by your behavior.

“Might I suggest seeking out company, Sergeant? It often helps sir when he can’t sleep.”

Bucky swallowed around the lump in his throat as he pulled his sweat damp hair back into a ponytail with his flesh-hand shaking. “Is he still up?”

“Sir has been awake for fifty-two hours and twenty-seven minutes.”

This was the other thing Bucky liked about JARVIS. He genuinely cared—no matter what anyone else thought, Bucky wasn’t backing down on this one—and as a result was sneaky in the best possible way, making it easier for his human friends to get over their own hangups and help each other out. Suddenly, Bucky wasn’t weak and fucked up and ashamed that he was too scared to try to go back to sleep, he was just heading off to help a friend.

When he arrived in the workshop, Tony was in the middle of a one-sided argument with DUM-E, goggles shoved up atop his head, a blowtorch going in one hand while the other gesticulated excitedly at the little robot. “I swear to… Barnes?”

Bucky would have laughed, except DUM-E used that moment to make a break for it, rolling over Tony’s foot in the process, which caused him to drop the blowtorch, which caused the grease soaked rags nearby to ignite, which in turn resulted in each of them being doused with fire-retardant foam, Bucky having lunged for Tony in an attempt to help.

Eventually, when the laughing and shouting stopped, he became the center of attention, Tony’s eyes narrowing as he looked Bucky up and down. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

For a long moment, Bucky couldn’t breathe, and took two steps back, wondering why he’d been stupid enough to interrupt. He opened his mouth to issue an apology, but never got the chance. Tony swiped at his chest, pushing aside the bits of foam clinging to him, continuing on as if all the color hadn’t drained from Bucky’s face in response to his tone.

“A Spider-Man shirt? You’re seriously wearing a Spider-Man t-shirt? Where did you even get that?”

Bucky licked his lips, not failing to notice that Tony hadn’t bothered to remove his hand. It was still pressed against his chest, warm, and comforting, and distracting. “It was in the drawer.”

“JARVIS? Are you fucking with Daddy again?”
“Sir, I’m sure you’ll find yourself surprised to learn that Agent Barton was the one kind enough to donate said t-shirt to Sergeant Barnes.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Iron Man is on my underwear,” Bucky offered, feeling immensely pleased with himself as Tony stared, and blinked at him, apparently rendered speechless.

It only took him the space of a few heartbeats to recover. “Actually, that makes me feel a lot better, thank you.”

“Sorry if I’m interrupting. I ah… couldn’t sleep and JARVIS said you were up, so…”

A muscle in Tony’s cheek twitched, and he pulled the date and time out of thin air before crumpling it up like a piece of paper and chucking it across the room. “Huh, time flies and all that.” He scrubbed his hands over his face, then gave a little full body shake, bits of foam flicking off of him as he did so. “Okay, new plan,” he announced, clapping.

“I didn’t realize there was an old plan.”

Tony ignored him. “Shower as fast as humanly possible, then meet me in the living room.”

Bucky didn’t have to be told twice. He was still surprised Stark managed to beat him there, sprawled across one of the couches with his feet propped up and a tumbler of scotch in hand. An assortment of leftovers was spread across the coffee table, along with a couple of the beers Bucky was partial to. He settled down, instantly feeling more relaxed, as JARVIS picked a movie for them to watch.

“Sir has requested something particularly inane,” JARVIS announced, sounding apologetic. “I present to you Sharknado.”

“Perfect, love you, J,” Tony cooed, eyes scrunched up adorably as he somehow slouched even further into the cushions of the couch.

Knowing that he’d be eating alone otherwise, Bucky loaded a plate up with a slice of pepperoni pizza, three of the dumplings from the box labeled PROPERTY OF HAWKEYE - YOU TOUCH YOU DIE, along with falafel and hummus. He snatched the scotch from Tony’s hand, replaced it with a fork, and shoved the plate at him.

“Thanks, mom,” Tony grumbled, even if he began inhaling the food after the first bite went down. “You’re worse than Steve with the whole mother hen thing,” he muttered around a mouthful of pizza.

It took less than twenty minutes before Tony was slouched over, dead to the world. Bucky helped himself to the scotch, so as not to be wasteful, then hunkered down, careful not to disturb Tony. He closed his eyes, concentrated on the sound of the other man’s breathing, smiling to himself as JARVIS lowered the volume a bit on the TV.

“Goodnight, JARVIS,” he said softly. “Thanks for everything.”

“Thank you, sir. I shall endeavour to prevent you from being disturbed.”
Comfortable

The first time he realizes what’s happening, Bucky isn’t sure how to take it, thinks he should be insulted, but can’t quite muster the appropriate response.

Stark’s one of those people who doesn’t shut up, or slow down, or really listen to what people are saying to him half the time, except for when he hears more than what’s said, as if having direct access to all the words you’ve held in reserve, and then it’s just plain eerie.

Bucky hasn’t failed to notice that Tony almost exclusively talks over (or around) most people, jumping ahead in the conversation, some strange linguistic form of acrobatics that occasionally leaves him stranded in self-created minefields when he finally realizes he’s overshot the mark, somehow missing the entire point of the conversation. It’s especially pronounced if Tony has been out of the Tower on Stark Industries business, or doing the peacock thing for the press.

Stark’s brain doesn’t work like other people’s, and it isn’t just the genius thing. Bucky’s pretty sure a lot of it has to do with Howard, and how Tony was (or wasn’t) raised. He’s still grateful Steve warned him not to mention Howard back when they first met, because Tony’s daddy issues are as exceptional as he is.

Tony has trouble paying attention to one thing at one time, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t paying attention; he has attention to spare. He could recite back everything someone had said to prove he’d heard them, even if he’d been talking over them while they were saying it, all while managing to interrupt himself—usually with asides for JARVIS—along the way, then use his conversational momentum to carry him through.

The saddest part (Bucky thinks it’s sad, anyhow) is that, although the other person usually winds up annoyed (okay, infuriated is more often the case), they’re honestly ultimately satisfied by the outcome. This is because the baseline for Tony’s human verbal interaction algorithm is that he’s only going to be spoken to because someone wants something from him. It’s when the person speaking with him deviates from this standard operating procedure that things usually get awkward.

Bucky can understand why some people think Stark is an asshole, because if you don’t know the guy it all comes off as pretentious, or condescending, like he’s too busy and important to actually shut up and just let you talk. Once upon a time, Bucky might have felt the same, might have dug an elbow into Steve’s side, and asked, “how the hell do you put up with this grandstand?”

Bucky isn’t that guy anymore, though, and recognizes Stark’s behavior for what it is; a twisty type of evasiveness, the sort you learned after having your legs taken out from under you in a big way. It meant people stayed just the right side of exasperated, which allowed him to keep a safe little buffer space between him and the person he was talking to. Bucky doubted it made anything hurt less in the long run, but he wasn’t exactly in a position to judge anyone on their coping skills.

The whole thing boils down to this: Tony doesn’t talk over him. Ever. His mouth will occasionally contort as he’s holding back the stream of words pressing against the back of his teeth, but with Bucky he always waits, and listens, and then speaks.

The strange thing was, for all his observations regarding how Tony interacted with others, it took Bucky far too long to realize he was being treated differently for some reason. He likes it best in the workshop, and most of the time it’s just him and Tony in there (well, aside from JARVIS and the bots, and sometimes Steve or Bruce), so he figures he has a bit of an excuse for not getting it sooner, but still. He was trained to notice things, and should have picked up on the uncharacteristic behavior
right away.

What happened was they had one of those rare evenings where everyone was home, and somehow hungry at the same time, and in the same room together. He’d been enjoying watching Tony run roughshod over Clint, who’d finally turned and looked to Bucky (of all people! He didn’t even understand half of the references being made) for support.

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“Barnes, talk some sense into him, he actually listens to you! I’m exclusively a Powerpuff Girls kinda guy. Fact. He has to fucking hack the internet and make the truth known!”

Tony is laughing and already back to berating Clint (“Hack the internet? Is that what I need to do?”), but as soon as Bucky opens his mouth to speak, Stark is all ears, and this is what causes him to recognize that Clint is in fact correct, has picked up on something that’s been painfully obvious for a while now.

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He figures this should be insulting somehow, because it must mean Tony thinks him delicate, something that needs to be handled differently than everything else, but surprisingly he finds himself just shrugging it off in the moment instead.

“I don’t even know what a ‘bronie’ or a ‘puff girl’ is,” he pointed out, “and don’t want to know,” he added quickly when Clint’s eyes lit up in anticipation of being able to explain.

The rest of the evening he’s only half paying attention to what’s going on around him, and can’t help but appreciate how the rest of them manage to keep him feeling included in the conversation, and in choosing the stupid movie they wind up watching after dinner, all without pushing him, or crowding him, or doing anything other than accepting him on his own terms of engagement.

Sitting on the couch sandwiched between Steve and Tony feels suspiciously comfortable, and oddly familiar, especially when Steve hooks an arm around his shoulders and gives him a little squeeze for no particular reason, like he’s just happy to have Bucky (not his old pal, but the current incarnation of the man) there beside him.

Back when he’d first arrived, the gesture would have felt somehow weighty with expectation, like Steve was reaching out only in an attempt to drag some remembered version of Bucky out of the Winter Soldier body he was trapped in. They’d moved past that, though, and he’s okay with the affection, rolls his eyes at Steve, a crooked smile working across his face as he relaxes.

It’s somehow even better when Steve reaches around Bucky and musses up Tony’s hair. Amidst the squawks of protest and Clint’s giggling, Steve had to get up and wash his hands (“That’s what you get when you mess with perfection!”) because it turns out there was a ridiculous amount of motor oil in Tony’s hair for some reason.

Bucky allows himself the luxury of softening his focus on everything around him, knowing he’s with people he trusts (even Clint), and is able to start running over conversations, and moments, and interactions he’s had with Stark since meeting him, all with this new datapoint in mind, reassessing, trying to get to the bottom of it.

It’s difficult to come to any sort of conclusion, especially with the distraction of Tony’s leg brushing against his own over, and over again as he shakes it, unable to sit still on the couch. He’s somehow managing to watch the movie (or criticize what passes for science in the movie, getting Bruce to join in whenever possible), while fussing with schematics on one StarkPad, while on yet another he’s catching up on his email and exchanging messages (insults) with someone named Reed.

Bucky drops a hand to Tony’s knee and leaves it there for a moment even after the bouncing stops,
thinking that the metal contrasts nicely against the well worn denim of Tony’s jeans. Realizing that he’s lingering, he makes a fist, and gives Tony’s leg a little affectionate bop before folding his arms across his chest. Bucky does not fail to notice that Stark’s attention is fully focused on him for just shy of two minutes before he finally opts to pick up where he left off. His leg remains still for the rest of the evening.

That night, Bucky imagines he can feel the lingering sensation of Tony’s leg pressed warmly against his own as he stares at his ceiling, puzzling over what he’d learned, eventually falling asleep without any answers.

Two days later, about twenty minutes into his visit, Tony manages to forget that Bucky is in the workshop with him.

Tony still isn’t silent—there’s an almost hypnotic and constant exchange of information that happens between him and JARVIS as he works—but his body language and movement changed significantly. He almost dances around the place, keeping time with whatever happens to be blasting through the speakers, and the way he issues orders and asks JARVIS for feedback is different, almost strangely detached.

He’d ditched his t-shirt, using it to wipe something off of his hands before tossing it across the room and almost hitting Bucky in the face with the thing. Tony’s hair was sticking up all crazy, the arc reactor glowing brightly through the hole cut in the tank top he’d been wearing under the shirt, and he still had smudges of grease everywhere.

The latest Iron Man prototype still looked more like a mess than a suit to Bucky, strung up so Tony can have easy access. He’s standing on the tips of his toes, half inside the thing, the tank riding up so that Bucky can see his navel, and the dark trail of hair leading down into his jeans, which are too big for him, and riding low on his hips.

Reaffirming the fact that Tony Stark is an attractive man is suddenly distracting in a way that hasn’t been a problem up until now, but leaves him unable to look away, and feeling guilty about it. Ridiculous lovesick lyrics of some heavy metal ballad (’without you, I’d be lost’ seems to be the jist of it) are blaring through the sound system, and suddenly leaving seems like a Very Good Idea indeed.

When Bucky announces, “I’m gonna raid the kitchen, want me to bring anything back?” Tony almost gives himself a concussion, cracking the back of his head against the inside of the suit.

Watching him extract himself is adorable, and Bucky bites down on the inside of his cheek to stop that thought in its tracks. It’s difficult, though, because when they’re finally facing each other Tony looks like a kid caught in the act of something unspeakable, all wide eyed and vulnerable.

“When did you get here? Did JARVIS let you in?” The words have no heat behind them, though, are just something for Tony to say while he regroups.

“I got here about two hours ago, Antoshka,” he answers patiently, beating JARVIS to the punch, “and you let me in.”

Tony manages to look equal parts embarrassed and apologetic, a strange smile sliding on and off his face (he loves the look Tony gets whenever he uses that nickname), and Bucky suddenly gets it, even though he’s pretty sure Stark doesn’t realize yet there is anything to get.

Anthony Edward Stark likes him. Not talking over him was a sign of intimacy and affection. Tony’s comfortable with Bucky being around, to the extent that he allowed himself to forget he wasn’t alone
in the workshop. Being who he is, Bucky understands how hard that can be for someone with trust issues, and is surprised by the way his pulse quickens at the realization.

They’re just standing there, staring at each other now, and Bucky decides to test the waters. He reaches around, grabs the rag Tony had shoved into his back pocket earlier and promptly forgotten about, and uses it to wipe grease off of Tony’s face.

Tony blushes, and remains silent. Go figure.

“How about it?” Tony is just blinking at him, mouth open as if afraid to answer, so Bucky adds, “Food? Coffee?”

“Coffee, as much as you can carry,” Tony answers in a rush, finding his footing again, snatching the rag out of Bucky’s hand in order to stuff it back into his pocket. “Also, be on the lookout for multitasking food,” and begins rattling off what classifies something as appropriate multitasking food.

There is a sense of relief, of purpose, that has settled into Bucky’s chest as he listens to Stark rambling, something he hasn’t felt in ages. He has a mission again, one of his own choosing, which makes it a special sort of terrifying, considering he doesn’t quite remember how to flirt.

He looks at Tony again and thinks he’ll figure it out along the way.
Scotch

Tony was beginning to accept the fact that for a genius he was sometimes incredibly stupid. Only in certain arenas, mind you, and really, it was more an obliviousness than stupidity, and it isn't like you could blame him for being preoccupied. There was a lot going on in his mind, he had enough big ideas over breakfast to encompass the entirety of some people's academic careers.

Being a genius was time consuming, as was being a big damn hero, and then there was Stark Industries to take into consideration, and yes, maybe he had thrown himself into his various projects with even more gusto than Thor when presented with a box of Pop Tarts, but that was easier than handling all of the ways his life had become less busy. It was a hell of a lot better than allowing himself to feel the empty places Pepper had once occupied, until she’d finally recognized that Tony was Iron Man and pretending otherwise was just not ever going to work out.

Still, he felt there had probably been other signs, clues, flashing neon lights, that he had managed to miss leading up to this moment. Or maybe not? Maybe it wasn’t even a thing, it could possibly not even be a thing at all, he could be projecting, that was also a thing people did, right?

But James—he refused to think of him as Bucky, because c’mon—had poured him a drink, and just as Tony had reached for it with the grabby hands, crooning, “Come to daddy!” Barnes had pulled it back out of reach, locked eyes with him in a sort of kind of smouldering way, then taken a sip. His tongue had darted out to swipe up a bit of escaped alcohol from his lips as he had finally handed the tumbler over to Tony, eyes still locked on Tony before he’d raised an eyebrow and walked away.

It had felt very… intimate. Yeah, oddly intimate, because for just a second Tony had forgotten they were surrounded by people, had let his mouth fall open in a little ‘o’ of surprise, caught in the snare of James’s eyes and distracted by the sudden quickening of his pulse over the little bob of Barnes’s Adam’s Apple as he swallowed the scotch. Tony's scotch.

Considering his love affair with good scotch, and his total lack of any sort of sexy fun times since Pepper had dumped his ass, it was entirely possible he was delusional, seeing what he wanted to see, because what he wanted to see was James doing that again, only next time? Next time Tony would slide his tongue into James’s mouth in order to taste, just shove him up against the bar and kiss him until…

Of course, if it wasn’t a thing, Barnes could break him in two with that (don’t think sexy) metal arm of his, and then it would be this whole awkward scene, and he had to fight alongside these people, and Cap was not going to approve, that much was certain, so… Peer consensus, that was what he needed, so he half turned on his heels, leaning into Bruce’s personal space, and pitched his voice low, an eyebrow quirked.

"Am I crazy, or did the one-armed bandit just give me the bedroom eyes?"

Bruce fought a wry smile. "Uh, yes, I'd say that was flirting, yes."

"Huh." Because, yeah, sure, why not, it made sense, they'd been spending a lot of time together, they'd gotten to the able to share comfortable silences together stage, even, so. Huh. This could be a thing.

"Tony," Bruce began, saying his name in that way people always seemed to say it, a blend of admonishment and exasperation, or, when he was lucky, affectionately exasperated.
The warning tone was a trigger for him, always had been, like a little red flag being waved, a challenge. Because, hey, what the hell? Why shouldn't he be intrigued by this particular development? It was an interesting development, damn it.

From his spot on the couch, Barnes was watching him, not being obvious about it, but not precisely subtle, either. The watching, Tony realized, had been an ongoing thing—he’d chalked it up to Assassin Behavior, no different than Clint's tendency to drop from high places when least expected (three in the morning in the community kitchen while Tony was about to eat the last of the leftover pizza, for example) and make Tony's heart feel like it was going to punch its way out of his chest.

"It's probably a bad idea," Bruce said, and Tony loved him even more than usual in that moment, because Bruce's words sounded more like encouragement than admonishment. He sounded amused, maybe even a little approving, like… like Bruce thought they could actually be good for each other.

Tony met Barnes's eyes, tipped his tumbler of scotch in the man's direction as if toasting him, and took a sip. There was a minuscule twitch at the corner of James's (admittedly pretty) mouth, and an almost imperceptible nod of acknowledgement, before he refocused his attention on the baseball game he was watching with Steve.

“I’ve had worse ideas,” Tony said, flashing his billion dollar smile as Bruce shook his head. “Actually? I only have great ideas, so if there is anything bad about this idea, that’s on him. He started it.”

“Okay,” Bruce answered patiently, patting Tony on the shoulder as he headed in to join the others.

Right. So. This would be interesting.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first time James kissed him, he was mid-sentence, didn’t have time to process what was happening, and went so far as to attempt to continue the explanation of why it was a colossally bad idea to arm wrestle Thor.

“Like, to the power of Pi bad…”

But James just used that as an opening to drag his teeth across Tony’s lower lip, then changed his angle of attack, sliding his tongue into Tony’s mouth, and that was good, that was great, actually, so Tony just went with it. Because the man’s lips were somehow even softer than they looked, while being firm in the best possible way, the way that meant the kiss definitely wasn’t an accident, or some clever ploy to make him shut up, but was in fact a strategic seduction strike on Tony.

Tony hadn’t been anticipating the kiss—obviously—and so he was all wide eyes and hands up in the air where he’d been miming arm wrestling, trying to use the fingers of his other hand to better illustrate the terrible electric death that would shoot through James’s arm if Thor came close to losing.

For the record, it wouldn’t have be on purpose, Thor wasn’t a bad loser, it was just he sometimes kinda forgot that he came with a warning label for a reason. Tony still hadn’t gotten around to fixing Clint’s Wii (because he was planning on building him a shock resistant platform neutral gaming station of ultimate domination instead) from the time Thor accidentally fried the shit out of it after losing a particularly close race in Mario Kart. The prospect of James’s arm being Thor’d was not on Tony’s list of things he wanted to have happening anytime soon. James, however, was on that list, Tony definitely wanted that happening.

So, yeah, he’d just gotten back after two plus weeks of traveling pretty much every-fucking-where for Business with a capital B, which had culminated in three (long ass, sleepless) days in Tokyo. Because she was a cruel (brilliant, wonderful, almost nefariously patient, and terrifyingly effective) taskmaster, Pepper had refused to let him use the suit for travel, wanting to maintain a crystal clear line of demarcation between Avengers Business and Stark Industries Business. Planes, even swank planes equipped with long neglected stripper poles, took forever to get places, and he was tired. And maybe a little tipsy, he’d lost track of how much sake he drank during the flight back from Japan, mostly because of how bored and antsy he had been during the flight.

Tired tipsy Tony trudged through the Tower thinking of tongue twisters, then Twister, then Twisted Sister, checked Twitter, and was almost knocked over by Clint.

“How? How can I not even get through the door yet, and you’re already annoying me?”

“You’re about to thank me, c’mon,” and Clint grabbed him by the arm and pulled him right back into the elevator. He was rubbing his hands together and bouncing on the balls of his feet as the elevator descended to the floor where the gym was housed.

“I’m so unbelievably not in the mood for whatever this is,” Tony sighed dramatically.

To prove his point, he shoved his phone in Clint’s face, snapped a painfully unflattering photo with the flash on, then texted the photo to Bruce without any accompanying explanation. Clint rubbed frantically at his eyes, and knocked his shoulder against Tony’s in a way that was brotherly enough
that Tony actually considered feeling bad about blinding him. Considered, and rejected, mind you, but consideration was involved.

“Seriously, your flash is like fifty times stronger than a normal phone, you asshole, I’m gonna see spots for hours! I thought you’d want to see your boy Bucky get it on with Thor, jeez.”

The bottom dropping out sensation in Tony’s stomach had nothing to do with the tipsiness or the descent of the elevator, and everything to do with the direction his imagination had run with this statement, because he instantly pictured the golden haired, muscled brilliance that is Thor sweeping James up into his arms, reminiscent of the cover of one of those bodice rippers, with like… oiled chests, and tight leather pants. The kind you laced up, right, but the laces would be partially undone. They’d be so tight you’d definitely see the rigid outlines of what was trapped within the confines of muscle hugging leather, and one of Thor’s massive hands would probably be tangled in James’s long hair, all the better to keep him still while Thor devoured him.

In this scenario, James would need to be wearing a billowing white shirt, one that Thor had ripped open, so you would see nipples, and abs, but more importantly the strangely compelling seam of his shoulder where metal meets skin, something that always made Tony’s chest ache with some bizarre combination of sympathy, possessiveness, and curiosity.

Curiosity is probably a really, really polite way to classify it, because, yeah, it’s perversion, he should be ashamed, because he was definitely a fucked up pervert. Only someone with Big Problems would look at the aftermath of what had been done to James and have the compulsion to trace every ridge and swirl of angry looking scar tissue with their tongue, right? He couldn’t help it, though, whenever he saw it, the arc reactor felt especially big, heavy, and out of place in his chest, and he would think of his own scars, and the hangups he used to have about them. He wanted to show James they were nothing for either of them to be ashamed of, because they were proof of their survivor status, and… fuck. Thor wouldn’t want to lick James’s scars, which was probably healthy, but also depressing.

And seriously, what about Jane? She’d be heartbroken, of course she would be, she and Thor had one of those Epic Loves, and that, that was the reason why Tony sort of, kind of, really wanted to smack Clint and make him take it back. It had nothing at all to do with the awful crushed aluminum can feeling that was happening in his chest.

That voice in his head, the one that pretty much always sounded like Howard, it was crowing, couldn’t be happier to point out that of course the first time he leaves the Tower for any prolonged period of time since meeting Barnes the guy was going to instantly realize he could do way, way better than Tony.

Sure, they’d been exchanging text messages, and late night (or early morning, depending on which one of them you were and where Tony happened to be at the time) almost pointless, but really kind of nice video chats while he’d been traveling. Maybe James had even fallen asleep during one of them, which meant Tony had spent some time just watching him sleep. In case he had a nightmare, not because of the fascinating transformation sleep had wrought upon his face, and sure, okay, maybe JARVIS had cut the call at some point out of propriety. The whole thing left Tony feeling like the best possible combination of a creepy old man and a lovesick teenager.

Technically, if you were a technical kind of person, it wasn’t even like they’d done more than flirt around each other, so it’s stupid how much he cares. Thor is a good guy, he’s a great guy, and you can’t do much better than the mightiest warrior of Asgard (he’s a prince for fuck’s sake!). James had been through enough shit in his life, was still dealing with a lot of it, would be forever, probably, and the last thing he needed was a collection of new problems conveniently packaged in the shape of a man named Tony fucking Stark.
Besides, it wasn’t like they had to stop being friends just because James and Thor had hooked up, he was an adult, capable of maintaining friendships with people regardless of who they slept with. He was still friends with Pepper, who was currently getting horizontal with Happy Hogan, and they’d actually had a whole relationship involving sex and incredibly awkward conversations about feelings. Mostly about Tony’s inability to give up being Iron Man, his tendency to sacrifice himself at inconvenient times due to self esteem issues, the drinking, the long hours, the anxiety attacks, and inability to remember Pepper existed sometimes, and her feelings about all that, and yeah, no wonder he’d been dumped, he sucked at relationships. Thor was doing Barnes a favor.

A noise from Tony’s pocket momentarily distracted him, and he yanked out his phone, finding a text message from Bruce awaited.

My condolences. I’ll be back tomorrow if you need to talk.

Yup, that was definitely a kicked puppy feeling he was experiencing. Maybe he would take Bruce up on the offer, he was the only one who knew Tony had designs on Barnes, and clearly he was a good, sympathetic friend, had probably known about the whole Thor thing and not wanted Tony to bury himself in a bottle while out of town on Business.

Thanks Brucie, might take you up on that. Must be losing it in my old age, actually thought there was something there. No shame in losing out to a gorgeous demigod. Look how mature I am! Has to be shock. Don’t be mad if I blow something up later when that wears off.

“Hey, J? I need all the suits on lockdown until Bruce gets home.”

“Of course, sir,” JARVIS replied. “Might I assume this directive does not apply in the case of imminent danger?”

“Yup. Which, also, maybe see if you can scare up some imminent danger, that sounds really good right now.”

“I think that unwise, sir, as Captain Rogers and Agent Romanov are still…”

Before Tony can throw a tantrum about Iron Man’s ability to handle shit solo (he did that, like, a lot before the Avengers were a thing, thank you very much, and even after sometimes, and sure that hadn’t turned out great exactly, but), Barton began snapping fingers in front of his face to get his attention.

“Are you okay? Did you not sleep the entire time you were gone or something?” Clint asked, and what stood out was the look of genuine concern in Clint’s eyes. It made Tony suspect that he was doing a shitty job of keeping the devastation off of his face, and out of his voice.

Clint had clearly been waiting for Tony to leave the confines of the elevator in order to go watch Thor and James get it on, which… okay, wait. Now that he was actually stopping to think this through, rather than simply reacting to it, the idea of Clint excitedly dragging him off to the gym of all places in order to watch Thor and Barnes get hot and sweaty and naked with each other seemed really… odd.

Tony rubbed his eyes, growled in frustration, and flung his hands in Barton’s direction, as if this gesture could summon an explanation. “What the hell is happening?”

Clint groaned and slouched theatrically, managing to look exactly like an incredibly put upon six year old who’s had it up to here with stupid adults not ever getting it. “Like I told you,” he said slowly, as if Tony was being especially thick, “we watched Over the Top!”
It took approximately six-tenths of a second before everything slotted into place in Tony’s mind, and then he was upset for totally different reasons.

“Oh, fuck me.”

Tony all but ran for the gym, the crushing sense of devastation having been unceremoniously shoved off the roof of the Tower (have fun with the 93-story drop, sucker!) by relief, because Thor and James weren’t going to be ripping each other’s clothes off anytime soon (they better not, anyway), and even though it didn’t change any of the reasons why Tony was (definitely) not good enough for Barnes, he was going to happily ignore all of that and allow himself to be selfish.

Mostly though, he was thinking of the charred Wii, and of the beautiful, shiny masterpiece of an arm attached to James’s equally beautiful body. Nope, nope, and definitely nope, no arm wrestling with Thor allowed on Tony’s watch.

“Hey, Arm & Hammer!” he shouted, which thankfully got their attention.

Sure enough, Thor and James had set up a table in the center of the boxing ring, and were busy dragging over folding chairs, because they’d watched Over the Top, so of course someone (he bet it was Clint) would have speculated as to who would win in an arm wrestling match between the two of them, which is why they were going to “get it on.”

“Antoshka!”

James’s enthusiastic greeting was almost drowned out by Thor loudly declaring, “The fates have smiled upon us, for our brother returns to witness our mighty game of proving!”

Tony almost tripped over his own feet (okay, he definitely stumbled there for a moment, but he caught himself, damn it) because as soon as he saw Tony, James had smiled. Not his normal smile, the little one that felt like a slam dunk triumph when you coaxed it out of him. At least, it had always felt that way to Tony, right up until the first time he saw the real smile, the big one that according to Steve was standard issue for the pre-war Bucky.

Since he’d only seen it three times (and yes, he’d kept count, shut up) it was easy for Tony to forget how that particular smile on James’s face was like a suckerpunch (woomph, right to the solar plexus), and so part of why he tripped over his own feet was because he had forgotten how to breathe properly.

“Uh,” was all he managed.

James had already vaulted the ropes of the boxing ring and landed on the floor of the gym in one fluid movement, and so Tony had very little time to regroup before he was up close and personal with that smile, and forced to notice (like he did pretty much every time he saw the guy lately) how stupidly pretty James’s eyes were.

“When did you get home?” he asked.

The affection in his voice combined with the joyous relief Tony was feeling made him want to hug the guy, and thank him for not hooking up with Thor, but that would have been confusing.

“Pretty much just this minute.”

They just stood there and smiled at each other, and Tony felt his focus slipping away. That would be bad, there had been a point to his running in here, which was… right, eminent danger!
“Hey, can I talk to you for a second, like, out there?” and he hooked a thumb back over his shoulder, shaking his head in the direction of the hallway for added emphasis.

Barnes looked confused for a second, but motioned for Tony to lead the way, and then they were sort of alone in so much that they weren’t standing directly in front of Clint and Thor, which was good enough.

“Right, so, I know I’m occasionally the poster child for bad ideas—pot, kettle, black, all that—but you seriously,” Tony had to stop in order to take a deep breath, because James was smirking at him, those baby blues sparkling behind his dark lashes, his mouth all quirked up to one side.

“Great blue yonder,” Tony exhaled, the words sort of smooshing together as they left his mouth all in a rush. He could feel himself grinning back, or maybe it was leering, whatever. If James was going to smirk, he could leer, and if his voice was pitched a bit lower, sounded suspiciously seductive when he added, “Hi there,” then sobeit.

“Hi yourself.” James stepped closer, grabbed Tony’s necktie, which was loosened but still technically being worn, and began running it through his fingers in a way Tony absolutely approved of. “It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah?”

James nodded, and Tony waggled his eyebrows, earning himself a little chuckle. “You seemed upset about something when you came in.”

“Right, yes, uh, you can’t—shouldn’t—arm wrestle Thor.”

If anything, James’s smile grew wider, not the epic smile, not a smirk either, but whatever it was it looked good on him. “Are you worried about me?”

“Sure, of course, in a completely logical and not at all fetishitic way,” Tony attempted to clarify, and it seemed like James was standing even closer now, “which involves Thor, and electricity, and your arm; I showed you Clint’s Wii, right?”

“Clint’s what?”

“Something Thor decimated, accidentally, in a mighty game of proving, so this is not me being overprotective, or creepy, it’s… serious… okay, you’re going to need to stop being so damned attractive for like five seconds, if you can manage that, like maybe stop biting down on your lip for a start, because distracting.”

James stopped with the lip thing, which was a relief, but his eyes were twinkling, like legitimately twinkling, how did someone even do that? This was where Tony decided it would probably be easier to illustrate the aforementioned terrible electric death awaiting James’s arm using hand gestures that, in retrospect, looked suspiciously like he was miming jerking off.

“He’s an unintentional electrical menace, and your arm is one of a kind so, bad idea, really bad…”

Which was when James finally leaned down to kiss Tony, who was still talking with his arms up awkwardly in front of him, “Like, to the power of Pi bad,” until they weren’t, because he finally got with the program.

Tony heard himself make a noise, a sort of half-desperate, hungry noise, which James seemed to like if him cradling Tony’s face and sucking on his tongue while growling into Tony’s mouth was any indication. They both had their eyes open, which was really hot, because Tony could see the way
James’s pupils had dilated, the blue becoming a bright ring around the dark depths of, yeah, definitely arousal in those eyes.

Once he had his bearings, Tony didn’t waste any time, curled his hand possessively around the nape of James’s neck, and kissed back for all he was worth. James whimpered encouragingly as Tony took over, slow, deep, dirty, and promising.

He pushed himself up on his toes, wrapping an arm tightly around James’s waist as the kiss continued, unable to stop cataloging little things, like that James had been eating popcorn, and something peanut buttery, and how strange it was to have to tilt his head up to kiss again. It had been a while since that had happened, since the body pressed against his was all solid muscle, and stubbled jaw.

Mostly, Tony thought how hot his mouth was, and yeah, that his lips were just criminal, that their mouths seemed to fit together really well, and there was just so very much he’d like to do involving those lips, and that tongue.

After a lifetime, they slowly began to pull apart, and Tony grinned wolfishly, struggling to tear his eyes away from the state of James’s mouth, all red, and swollen, and yeah, they definitely needed to do that again, preferably naked.

Then they were standing there, foreheads pressed together, holding on to each other, and Tony sighed contentedly. Unable to help himself, he squirmed closer, nuzzling James’s neck, pressing his stupid, embarrassing smile against warm skin.

“You smell great,” Tony murmured, then, feeling a strange tingling sensation somewhere other than his crotch, added, “Clint’s been watching us make out, hasn’t he?”

The way they were pressed together, Tony could feel the almost inaudible laugh ripple through James’s body, and he liked that, he liked that very much. “Yeah. Do you care?”

Tony shifted so he could kiss James all over again, but didn’t get very far into it, because his phone started beeping at him, and Clint started groaning.

Clint was unphased by catching them sucking face, he had other concerns. “Is arm wrestling happening or not?”

The beeping was a reply from Bruce, and Tony laughed when he read it (Your last message makes it sound like Bucky and Thor just got married. Are you okay? What is happening there, and what does Clint’s paparazzi face have to do with it?), because he’d actually forgotten all about sending the picture of Clint to Bruce earlier, which was what had actually prompted the condolences in the first place.

“Tony has concerns, something to do with your wee?”

The beeping was a reply from Bruce, and Tony laughed when he read it (Your last message makes it sound like Bucky and Thor just got married. Are you okay? What is happening there, and what does Clint’s paparazzi face have to do with it?), because he’d actually forgotten all about sending the picture of Clint to Bruce earlier, which was what had actually prompted the condolences in the first place.

“Tony has concerns, something to do with your wee?”

Tony felt James shift to stand beside him, and grinned when the bionic arm was casually slung around his shoulders, like this whole kissing each other senseless in hallways thing was normal, like they just did this all the time.

“Photo op,” he announced, and leaned up into James so that their faces would both be in frame, mugging for the camera before snapping off a shot of the two of them, which he sent to Bruce.

Temporary insanity, I’m great, apparently we make out now, even when Clint is watching.

“Shit, I forgot about the Wii,” Clint said, sounding dejected. “Where is it, anyway? I thought you
were gonna fix it?"

“You don’t want it, trust me, I’m making you something,” the effect was somewhat ruined when a
yawn took control of his face, “way cooler.”

“So, no arm wrestling, no Wii… this sucks. Want to watch Rocky? I’ll get Thor.”

James tightened his grip around Tony’s shoulders. “Sure you don’t want to go to sleep?”

Tony grinned up at him. “It’ll be fine, I’ll just fall asleep on you on the couch.”

Which is exactly what he did.

Chapter End Notes

Just so you have context, Over the Top is a movie starring Stallone as a long-haul truck
driver who tries to win back his alienated son while becoming a champion arm wrestler.
For some reason, I’m convinced Clint would want Thor and Bucky to watch this with
him.
There were times when Bucky found himself convinced he’d ruined, or irrevocably derailed, something important by coming back into Steve’s life the way he did. It was a strange feeling, inconsistent and difficult to pin down, bubbling to the surface on occasion only to fade away and be forgotten again.

On the other side of the glass, locked out of Tony’s workshop, the feeling was almost suffocating, and without thinking why, he covered the lower half of his face with one of his own hands, some small, ashamed part of him missing the mask (muzzle) he’d worn as the Winter Soldier. Missed the illusion of safety that came from being voiceless.

The Avengers had returned from battle no worse for the wear, but something had transpired in the field that resulted in Tony storming down into his workshop, Steve hot on his heels. The most Bucky could get as far as details went was in the form of a passing comment from Clint.

“Mom and Dad are fighting again. Had to happen eventually, don’t worry ‘bout it.”

And now, on the outside looking in, he had that feeling all over again, that he had interfered with something by not staying dead like he was supposed to, upending things that had only been tenuously balanced to begin with.

The two most important people in his world were shouting at each other, and part of him wanted to laugh at the height difference between the men as he watched it unfold before him, but he couldn’t, because his mouth was dry, his fingers curled into fists at his sides, while his heart hammered fitfully against his ribs.

Tony rocked up on his toes in order to get right in Steve’s face, and Steve loomed over Tony, curled down in order to not give an inch, but neither of them actually looked angry. Upset, certainly, but it wasn’t quite anger, it was that confusing other thing. For a moment, for one crazy, heart stopping, gut wrenching moment, Bucky thought they were going to kiss each other.

It didn’t happen. What did happen was Tony threw his hands in the air, then crossed his arms over his chest, looking away. Away from Steve, away from Bucky (not that he knew he was there, watching) head turned so he was facing the latest model of the Iron Man armor, still strung up and only partially completed. Beside him, Steve’s features softened. He placed one of his large hands on Tony’s shoulder, the other on the back of his own neck, as if chagrined. His hand lingered, maintaining physical contact with Tony for quite some time, and Bucky could only assume the calmer conversation that followed was them apologizing to each other.

Bucky wanted to leave, but couldn’t quite make his feet move, stuck in place, watching. Steve was still wearing his Captain America uniform, the cowl pushed back, his hair sticking up wildly, the shield slotted into place on his back. He was all tensed muscle and tightened jaw until Tony quirked a smile in his direction, and did some reaching out of his own, one of his clever hands grasping Steve’s arm. At this, the tension uncoiled, and Captain America transformed, becoming just Steve again, no longer a soldier standing at the ready.

It was odd, not being able to trust your own memories. If he was someone else, he could simply think back, puzzle out whether Steve had ever made any indication that he was interested in something other than the company of a woman, but Bucky only drew a blank when he attempted to do so. And what did it matter, anyway? As close as they’d been, as much as he’d loved and trusted Steve, he’d certainly gone out of his way to parade dames past his friend back in the day, back when
those sorts of secrets seemed like the end of the world. Life had been so much simpler when that was his biggest problem.

With great difficulty, Bucky made himself leave, concentrating on keeping his stride nice and even, attempting to project a calm he didn’t feel as he legged it back to the elevator. This definitely was not him running away, no matter how much it felt like that, this was him respecting the privacy of his friends.

By the time he realized what he was doing, Bucky found himself outside, walking briskly past the coffee shop Steve had taken him to during his first official outing. It was a bit of a surprise; he tended not to head out on his own, unable to shake the conviction that there were undiscovered triggers buried deep within his psyche, just waiting to be exploited. At least if Steve or one of the other Avengers was with him if he has a relapse there was the chance they could incapacitate him before he hurt anyone.

Panic washed over him as he sidestepped into an alley, looking down at himself, almost expecting to find his old uniform in place. He could smell the leather, feel the (comforting) weight of various weapons secured on his person, and had to squeeze his eyes shut for a moment. Deep breath. Count backwards from ten. Exhale.

There was a tinny voice calling his name, calming and familiar, and Bucky opened his eyes, found he was holding his phone. No uniform, no weapons. Just his phone, and the clothes he’d been wearing while lounging around the Tower. His arm was covered by the long sleeves of his shirt, thankfully, although the metal of his hand almost glowed in the darkness of the alley, seemingly picking up and reflecting back what little light there was.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he finally raised the phone to his ear. “Hi, JARVIS.”

“Master Barnes,” JARVIS answered, and slowly, the panic began to resolve itself, becoming something manageable. “Forgive the interruption. As per your standing request, since I was unable to reach you to confirm your well being, I have notified sir of your hasty departure from the Tower.”

Bucky bit back a groan, squeezing his eyes shut once more, his face feeling hot with embarrassment. He’d forgotten the arrangement he’d made with JARVIS. The order to alert someone if he ever left the tower without notifying one of the Avengers first, especially if in a state of stress, had been issued in the aftermath of a particularly vivid (memory) nightmare. Tony was at the top of the list, naturally, which meant things were about to get awkward.

“Shit. What’s his E.T.A.?"

He’d hardly gotten the question out when he had his answer, turning in time to witness Iron Man dropping into the alley behind him, holding his dramatic landing pose for entirely longer than necessary.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

It was hard not to laugh at the way this sounded being delivered in the distorted Iron Man voice, so Bucky didn’t fight the urge, just hung his head, shoulders shaking. He heard the faceplate slide open, and took a moment to steel himself before managing to look Stark in the eyes. Tony was clearly concerned, but playing it cool, which Bucky appreciated.

“Sorry. False alarm. Everything is fine.”

“Riiigggghhhtttt.”
Tony took a few steps closer, and Bucky felt his face grow warm again, although for entirely different reasons. There was something about Tony while he was in the armor that cut through Bucky’s defenses like a well placed blade, leaving desire bleeding out in its wake.

“Seriously, though, what’s up? Feeling stir crazy?”

Bucky opened his mouth, fully intending to agree, or provide some other excuse, but instead he heard himself asking, “Are you and Steve...” only to panic, and clamp his mouth shut before he could finish asking something he wasn’t sure he wanted the answer to.

Tony did his best fish out of water impression, mouth opening and closing several times as he cocked his head to the side, ultimately staring at Bucky in (adorable) confusion. There was a sudden cacophony of whirs, clicks, and strange metallic noises as the Iron Man armor retracted, allowing Tony to remove it without the assistance of his robots, until he was just a man standing in an alleyway, holding a briefcase.

“Is there a second half to that question, or is this some weird existential thing you’ve been struggling with?” he asked, running a hand through his hair in a failed attempt to straighten it out. “I can’t speak for Steve, but I’m pretty sure I exist. You could always come over here and help me make sure, though.”

Despite the nervous hammering of his heart, Bucky crossed the remaining distance between them, settled his metal hand over Tony’s chest for a moment before tapping against the arc reactor—tap tap tap—ignoring the impulse to kiss Tony. “Seems real enough to me.”

“James,” and Tony’s eyes were far too full of worry and self doubt for Bucky’s liking. “You can’t kid a kidder. We either play Stinky New York Alleyway Confessions, or you let me take you out to dinner. Either way, we talk.”

As much as he was loathe to admit it, Bucky was happy to be called out on his ‘everything is okay’ bullshit. “Nowhere ritzy.”

Tony made a little, “who, me?” gesture, indicating the almost threadbare t-shirt he was wearing, which was paired with his most comfortable pair of grease-stained jeans.

“Alright, it’s a date then.”

Bucky wasn’t sure why the word ‘date’ made him so nervous all of a sudden. He’d had his tongue in Tony’s mouth, so dinner together shouldn’t be a big deal. It was, though, maybe because they’d never really gotten a chance to talk about the whole kissing situation after it’d happened.

If TV had taught him anything, it was that the whole landscape of romantic relationships had changed rather dramatically since his day. Their little hallway makeout session probably hadn’t been a big deal to Tony at all, and considering what was running through his head right now the best bet was to just head back to the Tower.

“Great, we’re going right up the block,” Tony announced, interrupting his thoughts and also heading off in the direction of wherever it was they were going, so that Bucky had no time to retract his offer, needing to scamper after Tony if he didn’t want to be left behind.

As they walked, Tony rolled his shoulder as if working the kinks out, but he was so pensive that Bucky was hesitant to ask if he’d been hurt while out with the other Avengers. Normally, he would have expected himself to be treated to some running commentary; info about the places they were passing, strange things that had transpired to Tony in the area, and so on. That was how it’d played
out every other time he’d left the Tower with Tony, and as a result the quiet seemed ominous.

They made their way into the back of a little Italian place, Bucky not surprised in the least when the owners greeted Tony in Italian, and ushered them back to a private booth. It was all warm earth tones, mood lighting, and mouthwatering aromas.

“They usually just bring me something awesome,” Tony remarked, fussing with the cutlery. “I can have them bring a menu, though, if you want.”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Okay, great,” Tony said, and he seemed to be fighting against something he wanted to say, his mouth working, and his eyes downcast.

It never failed to surprise him how dramatically Tony’s mood could change, how one moment he could be this energetic, magnetic, self-assured, spectacular individual, and in the next look almost alarmingly vulnerable, and entirely uncertain.

Bucky couldn’t help but think of the puppy dog eyes Steve was so good at wielding when he wanted to get his way, and while Tony’s wounded look was similar, it was altogether different. Steve’s was always focused outward, usually wielded to show someone just how much they’d disappointed him, while Tony’s was focused entirely inward, as if he was, and always had been, the only possible source of disappointment in the entire world.

There he sat, mouth pressed into a thin line as he fiddled with his glass of water, and Bucky wondered what in the world it was Tony thought they were going to talk about.

“So. Adults, having a conversation.” Tony sighed, and finally looked him in the eyes, seemingly prepared for the worst. “Lay it on me.”

Bucky had become so engrossed with the change in Tony’s demeanor that instead of the careful words he’d been trying to piece together, ones that hopefully would have kept him from sounding pathetic, or criminally insecure, he blurted, “I ruined something between you and Steve by coming back, didn’t I?”

Tony looked so monumentally confused that it was hard not to laugh. His mouth hung open comically as he processed this question, until something clicked into place for him and he hunched over the table, hissing. “Wait, do you mean between me and Steve?” he made a lewd hand gesture in an attempt to further clarify.

Bucky could feel the embarrassment now, had to fight the urge to bolt. “Nevermind, it’s stupid.”

“Hey, no,” Tony insisted, his hands darting out to grab Bucky’s, the picture of seriousness. “Not if it’s worrying you, it isn’t.”

Tony sat back as the waiter reappeared with bread, olive oil, and wine, doing his best to chat pleasantly with the man, his expression strained and his eyes desperate. When they were finally alone again, Tony slouched, running a hand over his face, looking far more exhausted than he had a few minutes earlier.

“Right, we don’t both get to be insecure,” he finally said, eyes focused on his glass of wine as if it was taking all of his willpower to resist drinking it. After a lengthy pause, he refocused on Bucky, a little self-deprecating smile playing at his mouth. “I call dibs, because I’m pretty sure I have way more practice than you.”
Bucky wanted to be infuriated, but was too confused by how his day was turning out to manage it. Instead, he ran a hand through his hair, wishing he’d brought a hairband with him so he could get it out of his face, and downed his own glass of wine in one gulp. This earned him an arched eyebrow from Tony.

“What do you have to be insecure about?” Bucky asked, not bothering to hide the irritation in his voice. “You’re…”

“In possession of a really shitty track record when it comes to alienating the people I care about?” Tony interrupted, pushing his glass of wine towards Bucky. It wasn’t until this glass was also drained that he seemed to relax. “I’m guessing the argument Steve and I had has something to do with you bolting tonight.”

“I wasn’t spying on you,” Bucky insisted, automatically regretting his choice of words. The palm of his flesh and blood hand was clammy, the fingers trembling against the surface of the table. Tony surprised him by covering it with his own, twining their fingers together. “I don’t know what you guys were arguing about. I just… got this feeling. Seeing you two together.”

Tony looked genuinely surprised, which was oddly comforting. “Okay, so you know the shitty track record I mentioned?” he asked, and the wounded look was back in his eyes. “I’m kinda hoping to break it. Apparently, that involves occasionally putting myself out there, which is tough, you know, because whenever I try, it seems to end badly for me.”

Bucky huffed a little noise of surprise, because wasn’t that just familiar? Seeing the way Tony was bracing himself for rejection made something click, and Bucky felt an odd sort of calm settle over him.

“Man, we’re both fucking idiots, aren’t we?” he asked, and was pleased when Tony let out a little bark of nervous laughter. “I don’t have any track record, really. Just a handful of experiences from before you were born, and those belonged to someone else.”

It was obvious Tony wanted to interrupt, but was restraining himself, his mouth pressed into a thin line as he listened, his fingers squeezing Bucky’s as if in encouragement. “This, the way you make me feel, it’s different. Almost like it’s the only thing that’s mine, if that makes any sense.”

“Total sense,” Tony answered, sounding amazed. As if he couldn’t restrain himself any more, he continued on with, “About halfway through the battle today, Clint went and ran his big mouth over the comms about us kissing, and I sort of flew into a building without meaning to.”

“Is that how you hurt your shoulder?” Tony smiled awkwardly, which was answer enough. “So, what, you caught flak for kissing me?”

Tony took his hand back in order to rub both of them over his face, groaning behind his hands. “Worse. We hurt his feelings, James.”

They shared a look, the sort of look only people who cared about Steve Rogers and knew what it was to let him down could share. It made the bottom drop out of Bucky’s stomach.

“Yeah, exactly,” Tony muttered, ripping a hunk off of the bread they’d been ignoring, dipping it into the olive oil, then shoving it in his mouth. He looked like a demented chipmunk when he continued, one cheek fat with the bread he was still chewing. “I got the whole ‘I thought we were friends’ speech! I had to explain that it’d only just happened, and we hadn’t even had a chance to talk to each other about it, let alone him, and Clint only knew because he’s a snooping pervert.”
“So there’s something to talk about?” Bucky asked, deciding he might as well follow suit, and help himself to some chow. He glanced at Tony to gauge his reaction as he popped some bread in his mouth.

“There better be,” he grumbled, scowling almost adorably. “If you feel differently, you’re the one telling Steve it’s a done deal, because my ego can’t handle disappointing him any more than I already have.”

“This is your way of saying you’re not interested in Steve?”

Tony actually threw a chunk of bread at him, folding his arms across his chest like he was two steps away from having a full fledged tantrum. “I’m interested in you, jackass. I know the tabloids might paint a different picture, but I’m pretty much a serial monogamist at heart, so if…”

Bucky didn’t let him finish, throwing the hunk of bread right back, managing to score a direct hit to Tony’s mouth. “You’re the best thing about still being alive, Antoshka,” he said before Tony could continue his rant, “and I’m crazy about you.”

“Great, then I hereby declare us in an exclusive, totally mature relationship,” Tony countered, slamming his fist down on the table like a gavel.

He stood up and leaned over the table, and Bucky met him halfway, grabbing Tony by the nape of his neck in order to pull their mouths together. Whatever lingering doubts or tension he’d been carrying dissolved at the feeling of Tony’s fingers cradling his face, and the hot slide of his tongue. He tasted like olive oil, and fresh rosemary, and made a soft noise of disappointment when Bucky pulled away.

“Glad we cleared this up,” he said, pressing another kiss against Tony’s mouth before plopping back down in his seat.

“Pepper is going to be so proud of me!”

Tony started fumbling in his pockets, probably intending to whip out his phone and send Pepper a message, but was distracted when the waiter returned with several dishes of amazing smelling food, and the phone was all but forgotten.

“You should talk to Steve when we get back. He’s been feeling like a third wheel and not saying anything, because he was just happy to see you doing better.” Tony reached over to sneak a piece of hot sausage off of Bucky’s plate, even though there were plenty left in the serving dish. “I think he was actually relieved to hear there was a whole romantic angle, and it wasn’t just us friendship dumping him, or something.”

“I’ll straighten him out when we get back,” Bucky sighed. “Why didn’t he say anything sooner?”

“We’re all idiots, remember?”

Tony looked incredibly happy as he said it, though, so all Bucky could do was grin right back, and raise his glass of water in a toast.

“To mature relationships,” he proposed, and Tony’s glass clinked against his own.
Facing himself in the mirror had become something of a daily ritual for Bucky, a way to gauge his progress, to familiarize himself with, of all things, himself. This day was no different from those preceding it, except in one brilliant, unexpected way; he wasn’t looking at his reflection in an attempt to recognize himself. This was a different sort of assessment entirely.

Clean shaven, the customary furrow between the eyebrows smoothed into nothingness, bright eyes contrasting nicely with the dark hair framing his face. He tried on a smile, watching the way it transformed his features, and though his eyes retained their seriousness throughout the exercise, he still felt the results were compelling.

Bucky Barnes had been charming, easygoing, comfortable with his good looks, and capable of using them to his advantage. The Winter Soldier had been flat, devoid of any concern for his appearance, single-mindedly focused on his mission. And James…

Well, James was stalling. He’d changed his clothes three times (ridiculous), ultimately deciding on playing it safe with a too-tight Iron Maiden t-shirt he had borrowed (stolen, really, which was embarrassing) from Tony, and a beat up pair of jeans that felt comfortable, and familiar.

There really wasn’t anything he could do to make himself look any better, so he swallowed his nervousness, counted down from ten, then nodded. There was no point putting it off any longer; if he and Tony were going to continue on, he needed to do this.

They’d agreed to talk if one of them had a problem, and as far as Bucky was concerned, this was definitely a problem. Just one he’d never expected to have to worry about when he’d moved into the Tower.

Armed with a cup of coffee, he rehearsed his carefully chosen words as he walked to the elevator, running them over in his mind again and again all throughout the ride downstairs, until he was standing outside of Tony’s workshop. Do or die time.

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered.
As expected (and confirmed by JARVIS), Tony was still there, fiddling with a variation on the armor, one he was attempting to trick out with new stealth capabilities. Also according to JARVIS, he hadn’t left the workshop since heading there after their date the previous evening.

It was clear he still thought himself alone, and so Bucky took advantage of this, hanging back in order to watch Tony’s movements as he worked, the play of muscles in his arms and shoulders, the slight swaying of his hips as he kept time with the music.

He had what Bucky thought of as his Twenty-Four Hour look going on. His hair was sticking up where it shouldn’t, he needed a shower and a shave, and there was something specific around the eyes that let you know he was operating without sufficient sleep.

Stupidly, inexplicably, frustratingly attractive is what he was. Just looking at him made Bucky’s mouth turn up at the corners, made his heart pick up its pace, fingers itching at his sides, wanting to touch the man.

Slowly, he crossed the room, thinking to himself he really needed to explain the dangers of working with the music up as loud as Tony normally did; anyone could sneak up on him like that.

As if to illustrate this point, he settled his free hand against Tony’s shoulder, and tried not to laugh when the engineer jumped in response, letting out a (decidedly womanly) sounding shriek of surprise. He almost, almost, knocked the coffee out of Bucky’s hand, but luckily his reflexes were too good for that to happen.

“What is with you people? J, music,” Tony shouted, once he realized what was happening. He gawped at Bucky, slightly pink in the cheeks, one hand splayed across the arc reactor. His breathing was loud in the sudden silence. “You’re all trying to kill me, aren’t you? Is there money riding on who can scare me to death first?”

Bucky dipped his head slightly, unable to hide his affectionate smile. “You’re like catnip to sneaks, what can I say?”

Thinking it was probably time for the peace offering, Bucky extended the cup of coffee he’d brought along, enjoying the way Tony’s eyes lit up as he grabbed for it. His irritation had already dissipated, leaving behind a cheeky grin in its wake.

“Yeah?” He waggled his eyebrows as he took a sip of coffee, but then tipped his head to the side. “Wait, am I late for our date? JARVIS, you were supposed to let me know two hours beforehand!”

“You’re not late,” Bucky folded his arms across his chest, and fought off the urge to kiss Tony. Kissing Tony was usually where he went wrong, because it was difficult trying to have a serious conversation when someone had their tongue in your mouth.

“No?”

Bucky shook his head. “I’m here to catch you off guard,” he explained patiently, “for the purpose of tactical advantage.”

“Uh, wait, what?”

It really wasn’t fair how attractive Tony was, especially when he was confused, and slightly sleep deprived, with his eyebrows climbing towards his hairline, and his mouth hanging open.

Worse yet, despite the night spent working on the armor, he smelled good, like everything that made him smell like Tony had been cranked up a notch. It was unfair. Bucky bit down on his lower lip—
hard—and valiantly resisted temptation.

“Just keep drinking the coffee, gorgeous. You look like you need it.”

“Doesn’t telling me about your tactical advantage negate said advantage?” He took a rather large sip of coffee anyway, adding, “And, speaking of negate, are you negging me right now?”

“Don’t know what that means,” Bucky answered easily, steeling himself for what he needed to do. “We need to talk.”

Before his eyes, the color seemed to drain from Tony’s face, and Bucky wondered if the prospect of talking to him was really that alarming. Apparently so, because even someone who didn’t know him well could see the profound concern that had appeared in Tony’s eyes.

“Shit. Already?”

Tony sounded devastated, and looked two seconds away from bolting. Now it was Bucky’s turn to be confused. “Already what?”

“You’re dumping me already?” Tony asked, and Bucky’s eyes went wide. “No!” he insisted, and Tony slumped in apparent relief, making another frustrated noise, his free hand going to his eyes as if to push aside tears. “Definitely not,” Bucky added, rubbing the top of Tony’s head affectionately.

When he raised his head in order to make eye contact, Tony looked a mix of extremely pissed off, relieved, and terrified.

“Right, just so you know, normally when people say, ‘We need to talk,’ to me, it really means, ‘You suck horribly at this, and I can’t imagine wasting another minute of my life on you,’ so, yeah, great, now that I feel like I’m going to puke, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

As if to prove a calm he didn’t feel, Tony leaned back against his workbench, crossed his legs at the ankles, and took another sip of his coffee, batting his eyelashes at Bucky.

And, naturally, Bucky forgot all of his carefully prepared words, his plans for a calm, articulate (mature adult) inquiry, and instead blurted, “Why don’t you want to have sex with me?”

The next few minutes were spent trying to make sure Tony didn’t actually die from the coffee he’d inhaled, and mostly consisted of coughing, wheezing, more coughing, sputtering, and eventually ended with Tony staring at him in abject horror, hissing, “What?”

Bucky licked his lips, and wondered if he’d ever get the hang of this. Steve assured him that back in the day he used to be confident, maybe even suave. It was hard to tell if his current track record for confusing conversations with this man was specifically because of how much he liked (loved, it was love) Tony, or just because he had no business attempting a relationship during this stage of his recovery.

“Seriously, what? I cannot emphasise what enough,” Tony had to stop to cough again.

Well, it was too late already, so there was no point in trying to steer things back to his prepared remarks. Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face, and just started talking.

“Antoshka, you’re amazing,” and there was that “waiting for the other shoe to drop” look in Tony’s eyes again, so he plowed on. “If I was crazy about you before, I’m certifiable now. I’ve been
enjoying our dates, so if you need time, that’s fine. I can wait. And,” he grit his teeth, because he really, really hoped this wasn’t the case, but he was—again—nuts about the guy, so, “if you’re not actually comfortable having sex with men, I’m sure we can figure something out.”

This time, Tony looked insulted, and his free hand began gesturing wildly, a clear sign of his agitation. “Not comfortable with men? Are you… what?” He jabbed a finger in Bucky’s direction. “I don’t even have a gag reflex anymore, that’s how comfortable I am, thank you very much!”

Bucky found this to be incredibly interesting, as well as distracting (because, really? none?), and slightly crushing, because if Tony was that experienced, then the problem was him, after all.

Shoulders sagging a bit, Bucky tried to hide his disappointment. It was still there in his voice, though. “Okay, then.”

Tony took a deep breath, set his unfinished, mostly inhaled cup of coffee down on the workbench, and began rubbing his temples. “Hang on, full stop, I feel like we’re having a huge communication breakdown here, because you can’t possibly be suggesting I’m not interested in having sex with you, since that is insane.”

“How is it insane?” Bucky asked, raising his voice despite himself. “What else am I supposed to think? One minute we’re hot and heavy, and the next I’m being shown the door!”

Tony opened his mouth, his eyes wide, but Bucky continued on, unable to stop himself now that he was finally clearing the air. “I had to jerk off four times in the last twenty-four hours because of you.”

The noise Tony made in response to this would have been amusing if Bucky wasn’t so frustrated. It was a high pitched sort of keening sound of desperation, and accompanied by some impressive facial acrobatics on Tony’s part.

“Oh my god,” he finally managed. “Four, really? Just… Okay, right, yes, we so need to talk, we have so much talking to do.” He pressed both hands to his face, looking completely stunned, before his eyes took on a hungry sort of gleam.

He watched as Tony let his hands slide from his face, fingers tugging thoughtfully at his lower lip along the way. “Sorry, I’ve gotta know, which hand did you use?”

Bucky’s eyes widened as he found himself yanked forward against Tony, who wasted no time waiting for an actual answer to his question, choosing instead to crush their mouths together in a fierce kiss.

“Oh,” Bucky managed, but Tony used this as an opening for tongue, and really, it was an effective distraction.

He was beginning to think Tony was right about the miscommunication. Clearly there was interest; he could feel it brushing against his thigh as they kissed.

“I’m sorry,” Tony announced, pulling back enough so they could see each other, “I thought, well, back me up here, things were different back in the day, right? So, yeah, taking things slow. Respectful. Do you have any idea how hard it’s been respecting you?”

“What are you talking about?”

Bucky also didn’t wait for an answer, just shook his head, kissed Tony again, unable to help himself, sinking his hands into Tony’s hair to hold him still. This was why he had tried to avoid the kissing altogether. It was impossible to think when Tony kissed him. He groaned into Tony’s mouth,
worrying at his lower lip, chasing after his tongue, until they were both breathing heavily.

Something occurred to him, though, and it cut through the fog. Bucky slid his hands down to Tony’s shoulders and reluctantly pushed him back to arm’s length, feeling nervous all over again. “I’m not exactly a virgin, Antoshka.”

Tony’s expression shifted immediately, his smile large, and easy, and even before he said anything, Bucky relaxed. “Didn’t say you were,” he babbled, “I just thought—I didn’t want to rush you.”

“Rush me?” Bucky didn’t bother to hide his incredulity. “I haven’t gotten laid since World War II, and you’re worried about rushing me?”

Tony was once again rendered speechless, his mouth opening and closing, and Bucky hoped he was in the process of realizing how much sex they could have been having over the last few weeks.

Feeling like he finally knew where he stood with Tony, Bucky smirked, and decided to torment him. It was only fair, after all.

“To answer your previous question, both hands,” he held up his bionic hand, waggled two of his fingers in front of Tony’s face, “only last time these weren’t wrapped around my dick.”

Just like that, Tony’s pupils dilated, and he licked his lips. When he spoke, his voice was low, his tone serious. “Where were they?” he asked, settling his hands on Bucky’s hips.

“You’re a genius,” Bucky answered, “I’m sure you can figure it out.”

This time, there was a different sort of intensity when Tony kissed him, and relief coursed through Bucky’s body. Really, he’d have been more than willing to wait if Tony was uncomfortable with moving too fast, but a morbid part of him couldn’t shake the fear that the idiot would get himself killed in action before they ever got around to having sex, and then he’d be forced to have Bruce pull a Frankenstein just so he could kill Tony all over again.

Kissing Tony was currently at the top of his list of things he wanted to be doing with his second chance at life. The makeout sessions their dates had invariably ended with had left him with a deep appreciation of Tony’s mouth, and tongue, and teeth, of the feel of his lips, the way he tasted, and smelled.

It made him feel greedy, hungry, alive in a way he hadn’t ever expected to experience. It made him feel like a person, and wasn’t that just crazy?

Bucky slid his hands down over the muscles of Tony’s back, over his hips, and down further still to grab his ass, and squeeze. Tony made a soft noise of encouragement, sucking on Bucky’s lower lip, while one hand slid up under his shirt, and the other slid down the back of his pants.

Tony stiffened, managed to escape the kiss, his eyes wide as he stared up at Bucky. “Oh my god, you’re not wearing underwear, are you?”

“Nope.”

Bucky squeezed Tony’s ass again, and pulled him closer, rocked their hips together. He didn’t bother to fight his smile, or stop the little hiss of pleasure at the feeling of Tony’s erection rubbing against his own. This was already further than he’d gotten before.

“Oh, stop that,” Tony gasped. “Quick time out, I need some data.”
With a sigh, Bucky let go, took two large steps backwards, and raised his hands in the air in surrender. Tony was staring at him with an intensity that bordered on the uncomfortable, teeth worrying at his lower lip, his eyes traveling up and down, as if trying to decide where he should start licking first.

Since he could tell he wasn’t about to get the brush off again, Bucky let himself relax, ran a hand through his hair, shifted his hips. Tony stood there, watching, tapping his fingers against the arc reactor, his face flushed, pants tented, with that damned adorable frazzled and confused look going on, the one that was quickly becoming a favorite.

Tucking his flesh and blood hand into his back pocket, Bucky slowly ran the metal hand over his chest, down across his stomach, down and down some more, until he was stroking himself through his pants.

There was that little noise again, accompanied by a kid on Christmas morning expression, right up until there was only lust, Tony’s brows furrowed slightly, tongue darting out to wet his lower lip.

“I take it back, this is how you’re planning on killing me, isn’t it?”

With a lazy shrug, Bucky adjusted himself, smoothing the soft denim over his erection. The frustration was long gone, replaced with a playful sort of happiness. He no longer had any doubts about Tony’s interest, so he might as well enjoy himself, revel in this unfamiliar, excited, anticipatory feeling.

“Sounded like you were done with me,” Bucky answered calmly. “Figured if I was going to have to jerk off again, might as well do it here.” He slowly palmed himself, enjoying the way Tony swayed in his direction in response. “Least this way I can look at you.”

This must have flipped some sort of switch in Tony’s brain, because he was grinning, his eyes sparkling with mischief. He quickly crossed the divide between them, grabbing hold of Bucky’s wrist to still the movement of his hand.

“Refractory period, yours, it’s good I’m assuming, yes?” he asked, and Bucky had a moment of déjà vu, thinking of being asked about how the arm worked, all that time ago. It was surreal, understanding how much he’d changed since they’d first met. He had the feeling Tony had done some changing as well.

“Very.”

“Excellent,” and this time it was Bucky’s turn to make a loud, surprised noise, as Tony cupped him, ran his thumb down the length of Bucky before beginning to stroke him through his jeans. “Here’s what’s going to happen, James. I’m going to suck your cock, and let me tell you, I give amazing head, so you’re going to want to hold onto something. Or we can use the couch, I don’t care, all I know is you’re coming in my mouth.”

Bucky definitely approved of this plan so far, but there was something he had his heart set on. Before he could say anything, though, Tony was continuing, and he was wearing his game face, the one you saw when he was strategizing with the team before heading into a hairy situation.

“Then we’re going upstairs, and I’m going to take my time opening you up, might even make you beg a little, but then I’m going to fuck you, until you come again. Sound good?”

“Absolutely. I think I get it now,” Bucky huffed, rocking himself encouragingly against Tony’s hand. He grabbed him by the back of the neck and kissed him again, before moving to suck hungrily
at his neck, and shoulder.

“What’s that?” Tony asked, beginning to march them towards the couch.

Bucky tugged on Tony’s earlobe with his teeth, and whispered in his ear, “Why they call you a genius.”

The laugh he got at this left him feeling warm and at ease, as Tony gave him a playful shove, then another, kept right on shoving until the backs of Bucky’s calves bumped up against the couch. He reached down to begin undoing his fly, but Tony swatted his hands away.

“Uh uh, no fair, I should get to unwrap my own present, thank you very much,” he said, shaking his head. “By the way, can I just say how unbelievably hot you are? I’m completely in shock—also, deep, deep appreciation—of your approach, here. Did you really finger yourself, or were you messing with me?”

Tony was clearly stalling in order to drive him crazy, there was no two ways about that.

“Sometimes I use three,” he answered seriously, and pressed the cool metal of his thumb against Tony’s lower lip, then into his mouth, “and sometimes I suck on them, wishing it was you.”

Tony looked physically pained by this revelation, whimpering slightly as Bucky removed his thumb. “All that respect for nothing,” he muttered, “unfuckingbelievable. Also, this, the no underwear and dirty, filthy confessions? I’m a big fan, just, never change, okay?”

“Deal.” Bucky rolled his hips, and grinned. They hadn’t even gotten naked yet, and he was already having the time of his life.

“Right, enough,” Tony grinned back, and with quick, efficient movements, undid the front of Bucky’s pants, his eyes softening with what looked to be more of the aforementioned deep appreciation. He stared for a moment or two, humming quietly to himself.

“I’m so happy I could cry right now,” he murmured. “Hey, JARVIS, no one gets near this floor, I don’t care if the building is on fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then Tony was kissing him again, a hand wrapped possessively around Bucky’s cock, which just about left him wanting to cry. He shuddered at the contact, at the feeling of Tony’s calloused fingers deftly working him up and down, and wrapped his arms around Tony, grabbing handfuls of his ass again.

They lost their balance, and as a result, Bucky found himself sitting on the couch with a lapful of Tony Stark. They kissed a bit more, hands roaming each other’s bodies, sliding under shirts, teasing nipples, sucking at any available skin, until Tony climbed off, shaking his head a bit as he stared down at Bucky.

“You are absolutely a wet dream come true,” he announced, “I hope you realize that.”

Bucky smiled softly at this, adjusted his hips, and looked down at his cock. Tony followed his line of sight, sinking to his knees, and leaned in close, until Bucky could feel his breath against his skin, and shuddered with anticipation. He chewed on his lower lip, tried to calm his breathing, and stroked Tony’s face.

Then all he could do was groan, loudly, wantonly, and sink back against the couch, because Tony
Stark was sucking his cock, and, “You weren’t kidding, Antoshka,” he moaned.

Without a doubt, it was the most amazing thing he’d ever seen, ever felt.

He hadn’t been lying about the virgin status; even a closeted gay man could occasionally get some action during wartime, as (some) people were a little more willing to look the other way while you found tiny moments with another warm body, something to help you hold on to the understanding you were still alive.

Those had definitely been different experiences though. From what he could remember, he’d had his dick sucked before, had sucked one or two of his own, there had been kissing and busy hands, and he’d let someone take him from behind once, not wanting to die without having experienced it. He’d even given it a whirl with the ladies, thinking it was worth a shot, but there was little thrill to be found for him there.

But those had been strangers, all dead and gone, and in a lot of ways, so was he.

Almost everything from the months leading up to falling from the train still felt like memories of memories, like something he’d witnessed, or had described to him, but hadn’t truly experienced. He had the understanding that the events had occurred, but they were disconnected from his sense of self.

Older memories had begun to return as of late, bubbling up to the surface, so that he could suddenly smell or taste or even hear what had been going on. Most of these involved Steve, his Steve, the little guy with the courage of a big guy, the mouth to match, and an even bigger heart.

Outside of that, his most vivid memories centered around death, specifically the taking of life. Of the feeling of his rifle in his hand, the tiny imperfections in the wood grain, the sound of it—crack—and the corresponding burst of blood in the distance, seen through his scope, strangely, thrillingly intimate.

There were also little islands of vivid slaughter to be found within his mind (he wondered when he’d ever run out of those memories), devoid of any emotion save satisfaction, not for the acts themselves, but for the completion of orders, of fulfilling his purpose. A machine put to use.

Carefully, with difficulty, he pushed away the thoughts of blood, of gunpowder, of Europe and the Commandos, of Bucky Barnes, of snow, and wind, bullets finding their targets, of the Winter Soldier (was he truly different? had he been remade, or only liberated? maybe he had always been a terrible and efficient exterminator of life).

Taking a deep breath, he focused on the now, on Tony, on James. On this life, this body, the memories he was making with the beautiful mad genius he’d come to care so very much for.

Everything he’d experienced since waking up paled in comparison to sitting there in the workshop, his heart hammering in his chest as he watched Tony’s head bobbing up and down, listened to the wet, hungry noises he was making. Everything was dust, and ash, and insignificant compared to being wrapped safely in the heat and maddening suction of Tony’s mouth.

It was almost liberating, letting himself be taken to pieces by someone he knew, someone he’d been lusting after, someone he cared about, and trusted. There was the overwhelming physical pleasure, but it wasn’t just that, it was the tight, suffocating feeling in his chest, the one he got whenever he looked at Tony and couldn’t stop cataloging all of the ways in which he was wonderful. It was the worry he’d start confessing things that might scare Tony off, because Bucky was pretty sure it was too soon to be such a lovesick fool.
Much safer to moan, to stroke Tony’s face, say, “Beautiful,” and, “Just like that, yeah,” to accept the invitation when Tony placed Bucky’s metal hand against the top of his head. To take a careful handful of his hair, and guide his movements, effectively fucking his face, marveling at the fact that Tony really hadn’t been kidding about the gag reflex.

Bucky tried to hold off, but he’d been desperate for Tony for what felt like forever, and Tony could tell, was pressing the advantage, stroking Bucky roughly, while working the head of his cock, making his own soft noises of pleasure as he sucked, and swirled his tongue.

“James,” Tony murmured, pulling back for a moment, and Bucky throbbed in response, his hips twitching, because Tony was looking up at him adoringly, and yes, maintaining eye contact as he brought his mouth back down, and up, and down, way, way down, his eyes just smouldering, as he swallowed, his throat undulating around the head and...

And Bucky reached for him, a hand trembling against Tony’s cheek, the other in his hair, his hips thrusting up into the wet and heat, and then he was making a sound he didn’t even recognize, crying out loudly as he came in Tony’s mouth, watching in amazement as Tony swallowed, kept swallowing, until Bucky couldn’t stand it anymore.

He pulled Tony off of him, yanked him back up into his lap, and kissed him roughly, groaning at the stickiness, at the taste of himself in Tony’s mouth. He could feel how turned on Tony was, tried stroking him through his pants, but Tony nipped his lower lip, and tore his mouth away.

“Upstairs,” he gasped, and his mouth was red, lips swollen, and Bucky had never seen anyone look that beautiful before. “I get to fuck you now, remember?”

“Genius,” Bucky pushed Tony off of his lap, did up his pants, and stood quickly, scooping Tony up in order to toss him over his shoulder in the process. “Let’s go.”

“This feels undignified,” Tony griped, “but the view is fantastic.” He slapped Bucky on the ass several times as they headed for the elevator. As they arrived, the door slid open, and Bucky silently thanked JARVIS.

Once they were inside, he let Tony down, but only far enough to kiss him again, holding him upright with the bionic arm alone, while he slid the other back under Tony’s tank top, needing to feel the man’s skin beneath his hand.

“Okay, I take it back,” Tony gasped, wrapping his legs around Bucky’s waist, “the man-handling is totally a turn on.”

“Antoshka, your mouth,” was all Bucky could manage, sliding his tongue back into that wet heat. He wasn’t sure how he was going to handle being in public with Tony after this, knowing what he was capable of. All Tony would have to do was lick his lips, and Bucky would be embarrassingly hard.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Tony insisted, his hands buried in Bucky’s hair.

The doors slid open once more, and Bucky set Tony down, kissing him again before allowing himself to be dragged (willingly) into the bedroom.

“JARVIS, no interruptions under penalty of death,” Tony shouted, spinning on his heels to beckon Bucky closer with two crooked fingers. “You, me, naked.”

Without answering, Bucky pulled off the t-shirt, kicked off his shoes, and was out of his socks and jeans in record time. Tony stood there, hands on his face again, eyes wide, shaking his head.
“Okay, I was going to orchestrate a whole fun stripping thing, but,” he shook his head again, “this is good, I can work with this. You are unbelievable.”

“You’re overdressed,” Buck countered.

Before Tony could reply, Bucky began peeling the tank top off of him, touching as much skin along the way as possible. The arc reactor vibrated subtly against his chest, casting a faint blue tinge to their skin; Bucky thought it was beautiful. Thought Tony was beautiful.

What had transpired so far had already blown all of his expectations (fantasies) right out of the water. There was no comparing his imagination with the reality of Tony in his arms, and even better, they were only getting started.

He could already feel himself twitching with interest as he licked his way across Tony’s collarbone, up to his ear, across his jaw, trying to taste as much as he could before kissing him again, his hands busily unbuttoning Tony’s pants.

“I want you in my mouth first, is that okay?” he asked, watching as Tony’s eyes flashed.

“Are you kidding me? You’re not the only one who’s been jerking off,” Tony all but babbled, dragging his thumb over Bucky’s lower lip. “Gotta say, that mouth of yours has featured rather prominently in my fantasies.”

Bucky grinned, pushed Tony’s pants down over his hips, taking the underwear right with it, then took a step back so he could better appreciate the view. He was smirking, he could feel it, but goddamn, what else was he meant to do?

Tony was gorgeous, a lovely combination of hard muscle and soft lines, the arc reactor glowing brightly in the center of his chest. There were scars, thick ones (like his own), ringed around the reactor, but he liked them.

There were other scars, as well, and Bucky wanted to learn the stories behind each of them, wanted to memorize every inch of Tony’s body, to take the knowledge of him and use it to fill up all the empty spaces where so many of his own memories should be, but weren’t.

It left his chest heaving with want, as he finally got to follow the tantalizing line of hair down from Tony’s navel to his cock, which was standing proudly at attention. Bucky felt more blood pumping south as he stared, because it was Tony, and this was what he’d been desperately trying to imagine. And now it was (finally) happening, he was going to be allowed to wrap his lips around that cock, Tony was going to suck him, and…

Tony decided that was the moment to begin acting like a total clown, striking a dramatic pose before turning to show off his ass, smiling lewdly over his shoulder. It wasn’t anything Bucky would have imagined happening, or included in one of his jerk off fantasies, which made it perfect, and real. He could only shake his head while laughter bubbled up from somewhere deep inside of him, as he headed over to Tony, intent on tasting him.

“Grandstand,” he chided, but before he could sink to his knees, Tony was on the bed, crawling away from him. “Where you think you’re going?”

“Genius, remember? Get up here.”

Bucky followed suit, crawled across the bed, watching as Tony reached into the nightstand and came away with lube and a smile. As soon as he was close enough to grab, Bucky had his hands on him, kissing his way back into Tony’s mouth as he slid his metal hand up the inside of Tony’s thigh,
making him shudder along the way.

As soon as his cool fingers wrapped around Tony’s cock, the man groaned loudly, mouth sliding away from Bucky’s, until he was dragging his teeth over Bucky’s chin, tongue darting out to taste the slight cleft there.

“Turn a bit, yeah,” Tony ordered, tugging and repositioning until Bucky was on all fours beside him. “Mmm, right, so, I think you said something about your mouth?”

Bucky sucked on his lower lip, enjoying the way it made Tony twitch to watch him do it, trying to slow himself down a bit, to fight the urgency. Taking a deep breath, he locked eyes with Tony as he slowly lowered his mouth until he was close enough to lick roughly across the head of Tony’s cock. His eyes fluttered shut for a moment, as he licked again, chasing after the taste of Tony, of his Antoshka.

“That is so unbelievably hot,” Tony moaned, pushing some of Bucky’s hair aside so he’d have a better view. His other hand slid down Bucky’s back, over the curve of his ass, squeezing, before sliding back up again.

Smirking again, Bucky began working his lips around Tony in earnest, taking a bit more of him into his mouth each time, his eyes fluttering with pleasure as his mouth filled with the taste of Tony.

There were many strange, disconnected thoughts and feelings rushing through Bucky’s mind, more so than usual, but all of them were centered on Tony, and could be summed up nicely with an overwhelming sense ofrightness.

Tony’s breathing, his little gasps of pleasure, the tiny noises of delight, they were addicting, were the most amazing sounds Bucky had ever heard. The taste of him, the smell and sound of him, seemed to push away the rest of Bucky’s life, until there was only the two of them, this room, this bed, and the pleasure they were sharing.

“Absolutely beautiful,” Tony sighed, and then it was Bucky’s turn to moan again. There was a slippery, lubed finger rubbing circles against his anus. “We good?”

“Only if you stick that in me,” Bucky gasped, meeting Tony’s eyes. Then he could only whisper, “Fuck,” and sink his mouth back onto Tony’s cock, sucking greedily as he spread his legs further apart, tried to push back onto Tony’s finger.

“Where have you been all my life?”

Tony sounded awestruck, and it made Bucky feel incredibly sexy. There was amazing value to be found in that sensation, to feel so wanted, so desirable, after such a long time feeling nothing, followed by nothing but the ways he’d been twisted, used for destruction.

Empowered was probably a good word for what he was currently feeling. He took Tony into the back of his throat, loving the way it made his eyes water, made him gag, thrilling at the sound Tony made in response, feeling bold, and wanted, and happy.

“Cold storage,” he finally answered, and that he and Tony could share in almost hysterical laughter over this was heartwarming in ways that made no sense to him.

He shifted closer, captured Tony’s mouth for another kiss. “Antoshka,” he murmured, nuzzling Tony’s neck. “More.”

Instead, Tony removed his finger, returned to simply rubbing those maddening circles. “So, I’d love
“Anything,” Bucky answered, before even hearing what Tony had in mind. Tony’s eyes were wide, almost confused by his response, but before he could say anything else, Bucky added, “I trust you.”

It was interesting, seeing the effect those words had on Tony. His nostrils flared, and his mouth trembled for a moment, but then he let out a soft little huff of surprise, and kissed Bucky’s cheek. Kissed it again, brought their foreheads together, a soft smile playing at his lips.

“Okie dokie. Let me show you what else I can do with my mouth.”

Bucky allowed Tony to trade places with him, so that he was on his hands and knees at the head of the bed, face down against the sheets, which were still warm, and smelled of Tony. He felt his hips repositioned, spread his legs wide, wider still, and stared back over his shoulder the best he could.

“Time for a little bedroom experimentation,” Tony declared, running his hands over the curve of Bucky’s bottom, squeezing, kneading, then stroking again. “Not everyone likes this, so, just let me know if I should stop.”

“Should probably start, first,” Bucky pointed out, earning himself a playful slap to his bottom.

He could hear Tony murmur something (it sounded like ‘for science’), but then lost the plot entirely, because there was a warm, wet, insistent tongue lapping against him, then wriggling into him, and that was just amazing, there just weren’t words for that.

“Don’t you dare stop,” he ordered, face mashed into the sheets, pushing back against the sensation.

Tony hummed against him, the facial hair surprisingly soft, and arousing against Bucky’s sensitive skin, because even without seeing him, he could feel that this was Tony, could be no one else.

Around and around, and in and out, and then sucking, and humming, and, yes, he liked this very much, but then again, was pretty sure he’d like just about anything if Tony was the one doing it to him.

Bucky hardly recognized the sounds he was making, aborted words, and noises of encouragement, as Tony spread him wide open, a hand on each ass cheek, and very effectively demonstrated what he was capable of doing with his mouth.

It occurred to Bucky that if Tony was this enthusiastic about being on that side of the equation, he was likely equally receptive to receiving this sort of attention. He had the sudden mental image of Tony, writhing on the sheets, whimpering as Bucky licked his way inside…

“Antoshka,” he managed to push himself up onto his elbows, twisting so he could see Tony again.

He was flushed all over, his eyes dark and intense as he stopped the oral onslaught, resting his chin on Bucky’s ass, blinking innocently. “Yes, dear?”

Bucky licked his lips, said, “Next time, I get to do this to you, deal?”

“Absolutely.”

The smile Tony wore was unlike any he’d seen as of yet, a strange mix of pleasure, pride, vulnerability, and, Bucky couldn’t think past that, as Tony pushed two fingers inside of him, thrusting with much more purpose than he’d shown previously.
“Fuck me,” he gasped.

“That’s the idea, yeah, definitely,” Tony answered, biting one of Bucky’s asscheeks before diving back in, licking around his fingers as they worked in and out, in and out. “You are, without a doubt, getting fucked tonight.”

“It’s still morning,” Bucky hardly recognized his voice, as it had gone all high pitched, and needy. His cock was fully erect again, very much interested in what Tony was doing to his ass. “If you try to make me wait til tonight—oh, Antoshka.”

There were three fingers inside of him now, and it still wasn’t enough. It took all of Bucky’s self control not to touch himself, to just start stroking until he came all over Tony’s expensive sheets; he was pretty sure he’d be able to get it up again if he did.

“Sorry, losing track of days and nights again, you know me,” Tony babbled. “Look at you, I had all these grand designs, but I don’t know how much longer I can wait.”

“I’ll beg if it helps,” Bucky offered, and Tony groaned behind him.

“Right, this is,” Tony sounded halfway between angry, and overjoyed. Bucky grinned over his shoulder, locking eyes with him, although his fluttered halfway closed as the fingers pulled out, only to return, slicker than before, carefully working even more lube into him before sliding out again. “This is just unreal.”

Tony slid his hands around Bucky’s waist, up his sides, then back down to his hips, pulling him back until he was practically sitting on Tony’s lap, so he could feel all of the heat coming off of Tony’s body, feel the hardness of him slide between his own legs, the head of his cock brushing against Bucky’s balls.

“Sit up for me a bit,” Tony requested, and as soon as he could, he had his arms around Bucky’s chest, was holding him tight, pulling them together. “I know you said you weren’t a virgin,” he began, but the rest of the sentence didn’t materialize due to distraction.

Bucky shifted until he was a bit more comfortable, better able to balance his weight, press his back against Tony’s chest, wriggle his ass against Tony’s cock, all while enjoying the way the hard metal of the arc reactor felt against his skin. Shifted again, until he could turn, slide a hand behind him to grab hold of Tony, pull him into another kiss.

They stayed that way for a moment, Tony rocking against him, kissing slowly, tenderly, as if there was all the time in the world, as if they’d done this together a hundred times. Tony’s hands skimmed over his stomach, his chest, tugged on his nipples, stroking and petting, and Bucky melted back against him, contentedly.

Bucky whimpered, his hips twitching forward as Tony wrapped a hand around his cock, began to slowly stroke, pausing to squeeze around the head, sweeping the rough pad of his thumb over the slit, making a soft noise of encouragement when Bucky rocked back against him.

He could actually hear Tony swallow, and the arm around his chest tightened. “Right, do you have any idea how distracting that is? Just… Let me think, let me… right! Virgin. You said ‘not exactly,’ which could mean a lot of things. Have you had anal sex before?”

“Once,” Bucky answered, sighing as Tony began kissing and sucking along his neck and the curve of his shoulder.

“Anyone I know?”
He was relaxed and very distracted by Tony’s hands, but there was no missing the undercurrent of fear in Tony’s voice; he was pretty good at sounding casual, or disinterested when he wanted to, but Bucky had spent enough time with him by now to know when Tony was faking it.

He didn’t need to ask who it was Tony was worried about, because it could only be Steve. Bucky turned again, twisting in Tony’s embrace until he could see his eyes, settling his hand possessively around the curve of Tony’s jaw.

“Whoever he was, I didn’t even know him,” he answered, and the relief he saw was intriguing on many levels. “It was in Italy, before we went up against Schmidt.”

Tony’s eyes were filled with a level of tenderness and understanding that would have made Bucky uncomfortable if it had been anyone else. He didn’t mind when Tony looked at him like that, though. The man had his own fair share of demons, of scars and traumas, and so his sympathy never rankled. If anything, it made Bucky feel understood, which was all sorts of amazing, considering how infrequently he understood himself.

“Didn’t want to die without knowing what it was like,” Bucky added, and Tony kissed him again, a pained look in his eyes. His mouth was tender, the kiss gentle, and Bucky sighed into the sensation, eventually pulling back in order to add, “Don’t really remember much more than that it happened.”

“Okay then,” Tony nuzzled behind Bucky’s ear, kissed his neck again. “I’ll go slow, as slow as you want, yeah? And if you don’t like it, we stop. If you’re not having fun, I’m not having fun, so just, uh, don’t ever let me do something you don’t like, okay?”

“Heard you,” Bucky agreed, wondering over the caution. He had the sinking suspicion that once upon a time, someone hadn’t shown the same level of courtesy to Tony. Had to swallow past the anger, the sorrow, that bubbled up at the thought. He kissed Tony again, tugging on his lower lip with his teeth, and decided it would probably make Tony feel more at ease if he simply told him what it was he wanted.

“I want to be on my back, so I can see your face,” Bucky said, reaching between his legs to place one of his hands over Tony’s. “Want you to see how much I love getting fucked by you.”

Tony’s entire body jerked in response to this, his arm tightening around Bucky’s chest, his hand picking up the pace between his legs, as he buried his face against the crook of Bucky’s neck and groaned loudly.

“That is just,” he said, before pressing a kiss against Bucky’s jaw. “I… Yeah, James, words, gone, you took all my words, you beautiful, perfect…” he grunted, an amusing frustrated sound, as he let go allowing Bucky to sink back down to the bed. “On your back, seriously, I can’t even…”

Not needing to be asked twice, Bucky did just that, settling back against the pillows, legs spread wide, a clear invitation. He stared up at Tony, hardly had time to appreciate how wrecked the man already looked—all flushed skin and heaving chest—before they were kissing again. Urgent, desperate, Tony’s cock sliding against his own, as they gasped into each other’s mouths.

Tony pulled away first, surprised Bucky by dropping his head to begin licking along the seam where metal and flesh joined.

“Sorry, is this okay?” he asked, looking up quickly, and Bucky nodded, feeling a bit awed as Tony kissed and licked his scars, as if they were beautiful. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve wanted to do that,” Tony confessed, “hope that isn’t too creepy.”
“No,” Bucky swallowed around the lump in his throat, stroking the side of Tony’s face, scratching his fingernails through the beard. “Not creepy at all.”

Tony kissed him again, slower this time, until Bucky could hardly catch his breath, could only rock himself up against Tony’s body, chase after his lips, wrap his arms around him, hold him tight. His skin was everywhere, and Bucky felt like he could come from that alone, just from being this close to him.

“Please,” he gasped, having reached the point where he couldn’t take it anymore. The way his luck tended to go, they’d be interrupted at any moment by a call to assemble, and he was pretty sure he wouldn’t survive that.

“James,” Tony sighed, smiling softly. “Absolutely, yes, now, right now, no more waiting.”

Bucky watched hungrily as Tony worked lube over his cock, pushed more inside of him with his fingers, then after some more shifting and repositioning, pressed the head of his cock against Bucky, and…

“Finally,” he groaned, forcing himself to relax against the penetration, struggling to remember how his lungs worked, as he watched Tony’s face. He was looking down, watching himself disappear inside of Bucky, biting into his lower lip, concentrating, moving so slowly, so carefully, one hand around his cock to hold it steady, the other rubbing soothingly against Bucky’s thigh.

“How we doing?” Tony asked, looking up, meeting Bucky’s eyes, and that he liked, that he loved, seeing the tenderness there. The want.

Bucky licked his lips, pushed against the intrusion, and shuddered as Tony sank deeper. “Better and better,” he managed, his voice low, and raspy.

Disbelief and desire and what looked an awful lot like absolute adoration rolled across Tony’s beautiful, expressive face. Then he was grinning, shaking his head a little, as he bit into his lower lip and gave Bucky a look. It was possessive, and hungry, and accompanied by increased pressure, as Tony rocked his hips, began a gentle in and out movement, but he still hadn’t fully penetrated him.

Bucky shifted, reaching between his legs to adjust his balls, pulling them up and out of the way, and on Tony’s next shallow, careful thrust, a needy noise escaped.

“Don’t tease,” he whined, lapsing into Russian. “I need all of you, Antoshka.”

“You have no idea how good you feel,” Tony grunted, exhaling shakily. He locked eyes with Bucky, and jack knifed his hips forward, going even deeper this time, his hands sliding down to Bucky’s hips. “You’re tight, and slick,” he rocked deeper still, and Bucky groaned loudly, “and unbelievably gorgeous, and I’m trying really, really hard not to come too soon over here.”

Tony made a frustrated, incredibly sexy noise, pushing down on the backs of Bucky’s thighs so that his hips shifted, and then on the next thrust. “Oh, yes, Tony!” because finally, finally he was all the way in, and Bucky could feel the stupid grin that he must be wearing, but then all he could do was hold on, because…

Because Tony was fucking him, and it shouldn’t have been earth shattering, it shouldn’t actually have felt like a tipping point in his life, but it was. He clung to Tony, allowed himself to let go of the last bits of urgency, of tension, of fear that it would never happen, and just felt, just experienced the overwhelming pleasurable sensations; Tony and Tony and Tony.

It was as if there was a line being drawn down the center of him, through the shrapnel of his
disjointed memories, through his heart. From now on everything would be classified as either before or after this day.

He'd once told Tony that his feelings for the man were the only things to really, truly feel like his own, and this was no different. This wasn't reaching for (or running from) the past, it was the start of a future he never expected, it was a moment between James and his Antoshka and it was perfect.

“Ever since that fucking… glass of scotch,” Tony grunted, rocking his hips, and it was overwhelmingly sublime, and Bucky could only tremble, fall into the sensation of fullness, of being stretched wide, of Tony, inside of him. “Seeing you swallow, and lick your lips, your stupid, stupid, amazing eyes, and you just… you did it in front of everyone, James.”

Bucky wrapped his legs around Tony, reached for him, pulled him down, taking all of his weight with a grunt, still rocking his hips, even as he kissed Tony, desperately kissed him, hands on the side of his face, breath coming in hot bursts as he struggled to catch it.

“Had to get your attention somehow,” Bucky panted into Tony’s mouth.

Tony propped himself up, hands braced on the headboard, began thrusting with a bit more purpose as he smiled down at Bucky. “You always had it.”

With a contented sigh, Bucky ran his hands over Tony, until his metal fingers were splayed over the arc reactor, the other hand curled around Tony’s shoulder, locked eyes with him, and they found a steady rhythm of pleasure together.

“Feel good?” Tony asked, his smile saying he already knew the answer to the question.

“Even better than I imagined.” Bucky gasped, as Tony shifted again, hands back on his hips, his cock hard, and insistent, and so much better than fingers, than anything. “Worth the wait.”

This got him a laugh, which he joined in on, which in turn had them both shuddering, Tony’s hips losing a bit of their steady rhythm. “You were working on the armor, and you forgot I was there,” Bucky said, and Tony’s eyes went a little wide, looked a little confused, and uncertain. “Couldn’t stop looking at you, at the way your jeans were hanging low on your hips.”

“Yeah?” Tony was smiling again.

“Mm hmm,” Bucky nodded, biting into his lower lip. “After that, I just… oh… two days later, Clint's condiment bomb, that was the first time I jerked off.”

Tony reached down, pushing aside Bucky's hair, which had fallen in his face, stroked his cheek. Bucky turned his head a bit so he could capture Tony's thumb, suck it into his mouth. This earned him a hungry, possessive groan, and accompanying hard thrust.

But Bucky could see the thoughts whirring behind Tony's eyes, knew he'd picked up on how that particular confession was phrased. It wasn't just the first time he'd jerked off thinking about Tony. He'd been waking up with the normal morning erections for a while, but had ignored them, ignored himself, for months.

Then he'd noticed himself noticing Tony. And then Clint had done him a huge, unintentional favor, and in the ensuing chaos, Tony had ruined a perfectly good suit, but had also stripped down to his underwear in the kitchen.

That night, it was all Bucky could think about, staring at the ceiling, trying to get comfortable and failing miserably, until he closed his eyes. Summoned the image of Tony, flushed with anger, the
efficiency with which he removed his necktie, ranting about how Clint was doomed, even as the shirt came off, and then the trousers, and...

And his hand had moved to his cock without him even thinking about it, had caught him by surprise; he was coming within a matter of minutes, Tony's name on his lips.

"Wait, the first first? Since, uh, waking up?" Bucky nodded, feeling shy where he hadn't before—it was sort of telling, after all—but thankfully the feeling was short lived. "Hmm, and that was ages ago," Tony chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip.

He lowered himself again, bringing their mouths together for a kiss, one hand tangled in Bucky's hair, words spilling out against his mouth, and across his chin. "I'm sorry, I made you wait so long, but I've got you now, yeah? Gonna take such good care of you, anything you want, James."

"You, Antoshka," Bucky said, slipping back into Russian, hardly able to think clearly, "I just want you."

There was a soft, strangled cry at that, the hand around his cock stroking him with just the right amount of pressure, and speed, and Bucky couldn't believe how good it all felt, how comfortable he felt.

"You've got me," Tony rasped. "We fit so good together. You and me, yeah?"

Tony shifted back, changed his angle, thrusting roughly, and Bucky jerked spasmodically with pleasure, because Tony had found that spot, was dead on target, and each time he hit it, Bucky could feel his cock throbbing against his stomach.

"Look at you," Tony wasn't even stroking him anymore, but Bucky still felt dangerously close to coming, his balls tight and tingling. "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

Bucky stared up at Tony, loving what he saw there, the playful, adoring smile. "I'm," and there he went, hammering that spot again, "Tony, I'm..."

"Yeah, c'mon," Tony grunted, "let me watch, I wanna see you, fuck, James, touch yourself."

With a sigh of relief, Bucky grabbed his cock, using the cool metal fingers of his bionic hand, knowing that was what Tony wanted to see, watching the enraptured expression spread across Tony's handsome face, much in the way the flush had spread everywhere else.

He started stroking himself, and Tony moaned reverently, his cock hard and beautifully relentless, and buried deep inside of Bucky. Bucky swallowed, felt himself edging closer, slammed his hips down to meet Tony's thrusts.

"Just like that, James, you're so close, I know you are, I can feel it," Tony rambled, "me too, so close, but you first, wanna be inside you when it happens, come for me."

And that was it, he couldn't have stopped if he tried, crying out as the orgasm tore its way through him, shuddering and cursing in Russian as he covered his stomach in semen, reveling in the feeling of Tony still inside of him, his one constant as he shook to pieces.

He'd never had an orgasm like it, never felt every nerve ending in his body firing like that with
pleasure, and release, and he felt like he might actually cry, it was so sublime.

Tony was still fucking him through it all, a hand splayed on Bucky’s chest, right over his heart, was making the most amazing noises, and Bucky’s heart sang, just slammed pitifully, chaotically against his ribs, and each beat felt like it was for Tony.

“Antoshka,” he sighed, limbs feeling heavy, mind foggy in the aftermath of release.

Without thinking about it, he dragged his fingers through the stickiness on his stomach, brought them up to Tony's mouth. Tony's eyes narrowed, and he made a noise that was somewhere between joy and frustration, wasting no time before sucking the metal fingers into his mouth. When Bucky pulled them back out, Tony leaned in close and kissed him, sharing the taste, moaning softly.

Then the babbling started. Bucky stroked him everywhere he could get a hold of, tugged on his nipples, and Tony's pace increased. Bucky took it, happily, feeling blissed out and unable to stop smiling.

"This is insane, you have to know how insane it is, because this is not first time sex, James, this is 'I've been studying your browser history and know all your kinks' sex."

"Are you complaining?" Bucky chuckled, and Tony shuddered at the sensation as Bucky rippled around his cock.

"Oh my god no," Tony gasped, "no no no, I'm just, oh, in awe of you, of us, yeah, we're awesome, best team ever, gonna have such a good time together."

Bucky grinned wildly at this; he liked the sound of that very much. "Not bored of me yet, then?"

"Impossible, completely utterly impossible. There's so much data to collect, James, fuck, you have no idea."

Tony's hips were thrusting erratically as he stared down at Bucky, eyes fluttering open and closed. "The things I want to do to you, with you, so many, many things," Tony was saying, which was hot, and something Bucky certainly approved of, but the next bit was more confusing, and he only caught the very last part of it, the previous words having been jumbled together as Tony finally came.

"James, baby, gonna buy you an island," Bucky was almost certain he heard, as Tony shook, and pumped into him, until they were lying there together in the bed, hot, sticky, tangled.

Bucky liked it, liked the feeling of not knowing where he ended and Tony began. He didn't mind the dead weight on top of him, contentedly stroked Tony's back, and shoulders, but at some point, they managed to regroup.

Then they were kissing again, slowly, tenderly, nuzzling at each other, staring appreciatively, Tony shifting his weight and pulling out, so that they were on their sides, but still wrapped around each other.

Bucky had no idea how long they stayed like that, petting, kissing, catching their breath, blissed out and grinning stupidly at each other. Tony was beautiful, just looking at him made Bucky's heart lurch. He hadn't quite expected it to be that good, and based on the previous babble, knew Tony was feeling the same way.

Eventually, though, his curiosity won out, and Bucky had to ask. "So, you’re buying me an island?"

Tony's cheeks turned pink and he cleared his throat, before giving up on the embarrassment, opting
for giggling instead, as he propped himself up on his elbow. "I’ll have you know my sex talk is unparalleled."

"I just didn't realize islands were such a turn on for you."

Tony's smile grew wider as he started playing with Bucky's hair, the look in his eyes warm, and adoring, and happy. Bucky thrilled at the understanding that he was responsible for that look, for the way Tony’s hair was sticking up crazily, his mouth swollen from kissing.

There was a livid mark on Tony’s shoulder, and that Bucky didn’t even recall leaving it there was telling; seeing it made him feel triumphant in ways which should have been alarming, but weren’t. He traced it with his fingers, smiling to himself. No one would be able to see it once Tony’s shirt was back on, but he’d know it was there, and that was enough, was thrilling.

"Right, well, I had plans for the island that I neglected to mention, since I was too busy coming my brains out," he gave Bucky a look with that, raking his eyes up and down his body assessingly. "We were going to live on the island, for a start, with a strict no clothes policy. Uh, and no one would know we were there, so no interruptions, which is important, James. I need a controlled environment for Sexperiment Island to work."

Bucky was already laughing well before Tony finished, body still throbbing with pleasure, feeling lighter, and just... Different, decidedly, wonderfully different.

"We’ll have to leave everything we know behind,” Tony continued. “No more dumplings delivered at 3 a.m., and I’ll have to build some sort of JARVIS piloted body double to keep Stark Industries going, but it’s a small price to pay for important scientific discoveries, really.”

"I guess I can live with that. As long as it's for science."

Tony looked ecstatic, was grinning ear to ear as he traced the curve of Bucky’s jaw, fingers trailing over his chin before kissing him again. This was short lived, interrupted as it was by a yawn of epic proportions, and impossibly Bucky felt like he was falling in love all over again.

“Mm, right, some of us aren’t perfect, and get really, really sleepy after monumentally amazing, mind blowing, life altering sex,” Tony muttered, rolling onto his back and sprawling theatrically. “Wanna nap? We can shower when we wake up, then get dirty all over again.”

On cue, Bucky’s stomach grumbled loudly, and Tony erupted in laughter. “Guessing you’re heading to the kitchen?”

Bucky grinned back, couldn’t help himself, had to run his hands over Tony again, found himself nuzzling the man’s navel. Tony hummed his approval, fingers finding their way back into Bucky’s hair.

“Might as well have dumplings while I still can.”

“Smart, very smart, I approve.” Tony stretched as Bucky crawled over him, stopping to give him another kiss before climbing out of the bed.

Tony propped himself up on one elbow, and settled in to watch as Bucky got dressed. It felt impossible to wipe the smile off of his face, but he was in good company, in seemed.

“That’s my shirt, isn’t it?” Bucky looked down at the Iron Maiden shirt he’d pulled back on, nodded, zipped up his jeans. “Thought so. I meant to ask earlier, but you sort of found a really amazing way to distract me.”
“And yet, you doubted my tactical advantage.”

Tony threw a pillow at him, which Bucky easily caught and threw back, hitting Tony square in the face, which resulted in more laughter from the bed. “Better wipe that smirk off your face, or else everyone’s going to know exactly what you were up to this morning.”

Interestingly enough, Tony had that faint undercurrent of insecurity threading through his voice, as if he was secretly worried Bucky might not want their friends to know. As if he could possibly be ashamed.

He crossed back over to the bed, helped himself to another kiss before answering, “I think the jealousy will be good for Clint,” and he could see the concern slide away, Tony’s smile bright, and reaching his eyes again. Added, “I’ll bring something back for you.”

“And coffee?”

Bucky nodded, and climbed back off of the bed, having to look over his shoulder a few times on the way out of the room, not wanting to leave, as if leaving would undo what had been done.

As soon as he’d stepped out of the bedroom, he heard Tony call out to JARVIS, asking for the lights to be dimmed. Almost immediately after that, he added, “Make a note of the date, J.”

“Do you intend to celebrate annually, sir?”

“Yup, consider this an official Tony Stark holiday, JARVIS.”

Which more or less made it impossible for Bucky to rid himself of his telling smile as he left Tony’s suite.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you one million times over to everyone who left a comment, and gushed with me over "There Was A Moment" -- I love you all so much. I'm sorry to have made so many of you cry, but I love how understanding you all were that sometimes crying has to happen. And that sometimes the "happy ending" to unrequited love is just growing as a person, and learning to let go of something that wasn't meant to be. The good thing is, as I mentioned, Steve will find his own love, and because of this experience, will be in a better place to just go for it, rather than remaining silent. And also to appreciate it, and give fully of himself in return. Life can be cool that way.

Meanwhile, I hope the ridiculously lengthy sexy times installment was a soothing balm to all the pain the previous installment caused.

You have all been (and continue to be) amazingly supportive and receptive, and I can't thank you enough for sharing the love. It absolutely makes my day every time I see a comment come in. High five yo'self!
“There was just this perfect marriage of weight, and balance,” he tried to explain, his voice reverent. Clint was nodding enthusiastically, gesturing with his beer for Bucky to continue, as if he actually needed the encouragement. “Sometimes, out of nowhere, I can feel it. Slung over my shoulder, or in my hands. That familiar weight returns, and it’s like I can breathe easy again.” He snapped his fingers. “Then, poof! It’s gone.”

“Those M1941s are good guns,” Clint agreed with a nostalgic sigh.

“Don’t get me wrong, my Springfield was a real peach, and there’s something particularly satisfying about a bolt-action,” Bucky paused to empty his beer, and Clint hummed his agreement, then made little clicking noises with his hand cupped over his mouth that sounded eerily like the gun in question. “Lighter, too, but…” he sighed wistfully, “I’d take my Johnson any day of the week.”

“ Weird, ain’t it? The way some of them just stick with you?”

“Yeah.” Bucky rubbed his hands together, trying to push away the pervasive sense of emptiness, of aching absence. In an attempt to distract himself, he pulled the binoculars back up to his eyes and chuckled. “Look at these knuckleheads.”

Clint, despite a total lack of serum or other fancy superpowers, quickly spotted the group of hipsters in the building across the way. Without the binoculars, they were just blurred shapes to Bucky; Clint wasn’t named Hawkeye for nothing, after all.

“Oh man, yes, a million points for Barnes.” He slapped Bucky on the back as he laughed. “You’re at a party, idiots! Every last one of ’em hunched over their stupid phones. You’ll never get laid that way. Losers.”

“It’s the same thing, really,” Bucky felt the need to point out. “Tony has about three of the things on him at any given time, and if he can’t find one of them he starts freaking out, like a kid lost in a department store.”

“I’d rather get all phantom limb over something that can save my life,” Clint insisted. “Normal people don’t get it. You could replicate my baby down to her last precious molecule, but you put it in my hands and I’d just know it wasn’t the real deal.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Damn! Sorry ‘bout the phantom limb comment,” Clint blurted, smacking himself in the head. “Let Nat know I hit myself since she wasn’t here to do it.”

Bucky was confused, until he replayed the conversation in his head and realized why Clint was looking so sheepish. “Don’t worry about it. Shit, I miss that gun more than I miss the arm.”

“You’re making me want to go back in for my bow. Check on her, you know, make sure she’s all safe and sound.”

“You could ask JARVIS to look for you,” Bucky suggested, handing over his special Stark Phone, complete with his own personal, permanent connection to the A.I.

Bucky leaned on the railing, letting his eyes wander, feeling oddly relaxed, letting the sound of Clint talking to JARVIS fade into the background. The wind started picking up again, whipping his hair
around his face, and suddenly he was somewhere else entirely, the landscape shifting in front of his eyes. He blinked and the nighttime view of New York disappeared, the rooftop replaced by a wide expanse of snow, and trees.

The air is crisp, and clean, and so cold it almost hurts to breathe. Everything feels tight, and sharp—the buckles of his harness, the leather of his uniform—because his ribs are bruised, possibly fractured. They had dropped him in the wrong LZ, and as an added bonus his parachute had failed.

The mistakes made were beyond his control, but allowing any injury to occur is unacceptable. This body is not his to damage; he is a weapon to be wielded, and nothing more. The ribs will be dealt with when his handlers deem it worthy of attention. For him, there is only the mission.

The target serpentine, but he is an excellent shot, so his heartbeat remains steady as he takes aim, easily compensating for the movement. The recoil is uncomfortable because of his ribs, a little huff of discomfort escaping as he absorbs the shock. The words being screamed to him in supplication are as meaningless as the song of birds, relegated to background noise, nothing to concern himself with. There is only the mission.

The Winter Soldier’s stride remains consistent and purposeful, even as he steps over the body, cracked open by his bullets and emptying itself slowly into the snow. It makes pathetic, mewling noises, the fingers scrabbling against his ankle as he passes. Without sparing a second glance, he cracks his boot down hard, hears the whimper and crunch, and continues on, his gun already raised.

The wind picks up, whipping his hair in front of his face again, and he thinks to himself that shaving his head would make his work easier, isn’t sure why they haven’t just cut all this pointless hair away. Perhaps for the same reason that they fail to present him with any real challenges, as of late. These targets are beneath him.

It must be a test. He feels as if he has been aware for some time. It was always impossible to tell, though, there was so little by which he could gauge the passage of time, unstuck as he was.

The distracting internal grievances feel out of place, and he dislikes them. There should be only the mission, always. If he was meant to worry about his hair, or his ribs (or even the fact that he’s worrying about those things) he would have been ordered to do so.

His forehead remains smooth and untroubled, his mouth an unwavering line as he pulls the trigger again, and again, and again, dispatching his last three targets in quick succession. The shots are clean, and efficient; one bullet each, no headshots, as per his instructions.

He leaves the woman where she fell, mouth tightening with discomfort (one of the ribs must surely be fractured) as he bends over in order to take hold of one arm of each of the children, dragging them back the way he came. The smaller of the two has already died, but the older child gurgles for most of the journey, wet, pathetic noises that are barely audible over the sounds his primary target is making.

The man he’d stepped over, the one who was to suffer, he struggles in the red snow, watching as the Winter Soldier returns bearing gifts. Snot and tears and blood are caked in his beard, and he makes noises of pain unlike anything the Winter Soldier can recall hearing before.

When he drops the bodies beside the man, he nudges them with his boots so their faces can be seen. If anything, the screaming, the sobs, they grow louder, more choked with pain. Why should he scream more? It was obvious they were both dead now, far beyond the suffering the primary target was experiencing. It confuses him, but it isn’t part of the mission to question what transpires around him unless it is a threat. Still, it is difficult to keep his thoughts focused as he returns for the woman.
Again, the body is dropped, and the man despairs, while the Winter Soldier watches, his breath a white cloud in the cold air. Without the mask, it would be colder still. The blood is already freezing around him, the red looking almost pink in places where it has soaked into the snow, and without warning his heart begins to hammer wildly in his chest.

“I know this,” he hears himself say, eyes focused on the blood in the snow.

There is an image in his mind, one that has never been there before, of a boy, and he is with this boy. He is, in fact, a boy himself. It had been a special occasion, he could feel that, even without having the details, or context to provide clarity. There is a small paper cone, filled with shaved ice, drizzled with something red. The red has the consistency of syrup, something he has seen the others use on their porridge, but has never been ordered to try himself. They pass the cone between them, and he can taste it—surprisingly sweet—but he doesn’t have a word to correspond with the taste in his mouth.

The man in the snow howls, has dragged himself over to the bodies of his family, is stroking their cold faces. The Winter Soldier does not think before acting, he kicks him over onto his back, grabs him by the front of his coat and shakes him, crouched over the man, the pain of his ribs distant and unimportant.

“Do you know what it is?” he demands, shaking again. The eyes staring up at him are wide, confused, devastated. They are also familiar, they remind the Winter Soldier of eyes he has seen before (your own, they’re your own) and he shakes the man again, his blood hot with anger now.

“A paper cone, with shaved ice. They put a red syrup on top.”

“What?” the man gasps, his hands clutching at the soldier’s.

He looks deranged with pain and shock, and the Winter Soldier hates him, suddenly. Hating him is not part of the mission, but he does it anyway. He leans over, grabs a fistful of blood soaked snow and holds it up. “Like this, it looks like this!”

“I don’t… you… killed them, they’re gone, you… my children! You’re a monster!”

The Winter Soldier shoves the handful of bloody ice into the man’s mouth, causing him to cough and sputter, and he is shouting now, “What does the red syrup taste like?”

“Cherries, red is cherries,” he is finally told, and so he lets the body fall back into the snow.

His head hurts more than his ribs as he pulls aside the mask, grabbing another handful of snow, and closing his eyes. In his mind, there is a boy who smiles at him like he is a hero, and he says to this boy, “Go on, pal, you finish it up, I know you want to.”

The boy’s hair is soft, and blond, and warmed with sunshine. He can feel the warmth when he affectionately runs his fingers through the strands before slinging an arm around the shining boy’s shoulders.

“Red is cherries?” he wonders aloud, sliding his mask back in place.

His mouth is very cold now, and filled with the safe and familiar coppery taste of blood, obliterating the confusing memory of sweetness. Blood makes much more sense than cherries. Blood he understands; he isn’t sure what cherries are.

The Winter Soldier knows that he has made a mistake, is almost glad of it. They’ll retire him again, because he’s crying (Go on, pal…) and he doesn’t know why, as the wind whips his hair into his
“Hey! Hey hey hey hey,” Clint shouted, and Bucky froze. “Yeah, there we go, thank fuck, you’re back, it’s cool, you’re okay.”

Bucky was shaking, could still taste blood in his mouth, could still feel the sharp pain in his chest of ribs that aren’t actually cracked when he takes a deep, shuddering breath. Clint looked surprisingly calm despite standing about two feet away with his hands up in front of him, like he’s dealing with a spooked horse.

“Can you to walk to me?” Clint asked, and it was only after he took a few shuffling steps forward and found himself in a tight embrace that Bucky realized they were still on the roof of the Tower. He must have been moving around during the flashback, because a glance over his shoulder showed him how dangerously close to the edge of the landing pad he’d been.

“Okay, good, this is really way better,” Clint said, sounding relieved as he began walking them back inside.

Bucky allowed himself to be led, because there was nothing else to do, really. By the time they stepped back inside the Tower, he was sweating, and the warmth of Clint’s body against his own felt like being burned. He disentangled himself, stumbling towards the elevator, but his legs gave out on him before he could get there, and he landed hard on his hands and knees.

Clint was there in an instant to place a warm hand between his shoulder blades, and began rubbing small circles against his back. “I know, believe me, I know. It wasn’t you, though,” he said.

Bucky could only watch as fat teardrops landed on the floor beneath him. He fought against the tears until his sobbing was almost inaudible. It brought to mind the wet, desperate noises the child had made as she drowned in her own blood, and so punching the floor seemed like the only logical course of action. The bright bolt of pain exploding across his knuckles helped, but Clint grabbed his arm before he could do it again.

“Bucky, none of it was you, it wasn’t, okay? You can’t… fuck.”

“I killed his children,” Bucky all but screamed, his voice breaking around the words. He forced himself upright, so he could see Clint’s face, try to make him understand. “His family, executed, right in front of him. I did that.”

“Bullshit. That was not you,” Clint insisted. “Them. It was them.”

There was a good deal of pain mixed in with the conviction Bucky could see in Clint’s eyes, and he felt guilty for all the times he’d had petty thoughts about this man, back before he’d really gotten to know him. He hadn’t understood, not until later, having had to piece things together from Tony, and Natasha, and Steve, and finally Clint himself. If anyone in the Tower understood what it was to be used, tainted, it was Clint. In some ways, it was worse for Hawkeye—he’d been trapped in his own mind, forced to watch, but unable to stop his body from following the commands of another.

At least Bucky had the chair, and the vast expanses of emptiness where memories should live, which in some ways was better. In other ways, it was worse. Clint already knew all there was to know. He might have nightmares, but didn’t they all? For better or worse, Bucky’s mind was like a frozen lake beginning to thaw. At any moment, without warning, he could drop through a thin patch and find himself plunged into the past, left to choke and sputter and ultimately succumb to whatever waited for him beneath the ice.
“I left him to bleed out surrounded by the bodies of his family,” Bucky explained, his jaw tight. He could still hear the man's gut wrenching screams as the little bodies fell into the snow, one after the other, and wanted to vomit, wanted to scream himself in an attempt to obliterate the memory of the sound. “He called me a monster, and he was right. It was nothing to me. I couldn’t even understand why he was upset.”

“Which proves my point. That wasn’t you, Bucky.”

He wanted to hit him, to make him stop saying that, but he also wanted to hug Clint. He sounded so damned sure of himself that it was hard to hold onto the panic the flashback had left behind. The room and Clint’s face wavered around him, and he wiped hurriedly at the tears, hating them, hating himself. He had no right to shed them, he wasn’t the victim, he was…

“I know it sounds like bullshit, and that it hurts to hear me say it, but it’s still true. When I was where you are, Nat never stopped telling me the truth, but I’m thicker in the head, so she had to scream it, too.” Bucky tried to concentrate on slowing down his breathing, letting Clint’s voice roll over him. “Never stopped, even when she lost her voice. I figure I’m overdue on paying that forward, so I’m just gonna keep it up until you believe me.”

Clint stood up, and offered Bucky a hand. He had to leave it extended for a long time, but eventually Bucky accepted it, allowed himself to be pulled to his feet.

“As hippy dippy as it sounds, I want you to say it for me,” Clint insisted, not letting go of Bucky’s hand.

Bucky licked his lips, then cleared his throat. Clint’s eyes seemed to see everything, seemed to look right through him, and Bucky had the strangest feeling that if he looked long enough, Hawkeye would even be able to see those small, lifeless bodies, see the long trails of red he’d painted over the pure white canvas of snow when dragging them back to their father.

“It’s,” and he had to swallow, because his voice was raw, and worthless. “It wasn’t me.”

It felt like a lie.

Clint shook his head, and placed his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. “I need it one more time,” he said solemnly, “and believe it this time, even if it’s only for a second.”

He could feel his nostrils flaring as he attempted to control his breathing, his face wet with tears, and he tried, for just a second, he really tried to believe what Clint was saying. When he closed his eyes, he could see the machine above him, could feel the straps holding him down in the chair, the weight of the bit in his mouth, and when he opened his eyes and looked at Clint, he said, “It wasn’t me,” and then, “I didn’t want to do it,” and he didn’t even recognize his own voice, “but I was good at it, Clint, I was really fucking good, and I was glad, I was glad I was good.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Clint insisted, giving his shoulders a little shake. He pulled Bucky into a rough hug, and Bucky could feel the reverberations of Clint’s voice when he continued speaking. “They hollowed you out, and left you with nothing else. Of course you were glad! That doesn’t change anything, man. Even if you took pride in your abilities, it still doesn’t change the fact that it wasn’t you. None of it.”

Bucky had no idea how long they stood there, but at some point they must have moved, because he found himself on the couch, having a hot cup of cocoa shoved into his metal hand, and a bag of frozen vegetables plopped onto the knuckles of the other one. When he looked up, Clint was frowning, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he tried to get the bag of veggies placed
just right.

“I had to talk JARVIS out of calling Tony,” he said when he noticed Bucky watching him. He carefully placed Bucky’s phone on the end table, within easy reach. “Figured it should be your call when that happened.”

“Thanks.” He took a sip of the cocoa, smiling despite himself over the sheer volume of miniature marshmallows Clint had managed to get into the mug. “I’ll call him when I finish this.”

Clint sighed loudly as he plopped down on the couch, and it took all of Bucky’s reflexes to keep from sloshing cocoa on himself. “You know he’s gonna jump in the suit and haul ass back here, right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, liking the sound of that very much.

“Steve’ll be back in an hour or so,” Clint added, sounding much less self assured than he had before. “You know, if you wanted him.” The “instead of me” was left unsaid.

Bucky shifted a bit so he could study Clint’s profile as the marksman turned on the TV and began flicking through channels. It was obvious Hawkeye was still concerned, that he was probably dealing with the churning up of all of his own demons, but there he sat, searching for the perfect, stupid bit of entertainment to help them distract themselves.

“Thanks, Clint. You’re a good friend.” Not surprisingly, Hawkeye’s ears turned pink, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat, making a little noncommittal noise. “I’m glad it was you that was there with me.”

And because he was Hawkeye, he made a loud noise of frustration and said, “Drink your cocoa.” After flicking through another handful of channels he added, “and tell your boyfriend to fix my fucking Wii already.”
Normally, James was an awake or asleep kind of guy, very much the opposite of Tony, who was pretty sure he slept on a spectrum.

There were the drinking jags, which usually ended in blacking out (when properly executed), followed by a sort of hazy-not-awake that lasted until he consumed enough coffee to kill a weaker man. This naturally contributed to the bouts of insomnia he suffered; running on a significant sleep deficit made waking up quickly (when he finally allowed exhaustion to win out against stubbornness) pretty much physically impossible, unless he was being woken to Assemble (capital A assemble only). That at least came with a blast of adrenaline to force an unnaturally awakened state, and usually left him with Kickstart My Heart stuck in his head for hours on end as a side effect.

So it was a spectrum, yes, a whole stretched taffy continuum: actual sleep; sort of kind of asleep; not really awake, but not really asleep; so awake that he could feel his hair growing; just awake enough to resent the human condition; so on and so forth, shuffle, rinse, repeat, whatever.

James, though, James was binary about sleep—sleeping deeply was 0, terrifyingly alert was 1—and Tony envied him in this regard. He’d actually considered asking JARVIS to begin monitoring James’s sleep in order to provide him with some data visualization on it for comparison, but figured it might be too soon for that sort of thing. Maybe after they’d been together longer he’d try to work it into conversation of an evening, see if James balked at the idea. Tony kind of thought it’d be romantic, presenting someone with a lovely data visualization of their sleep rhythms overlaid with his own, but if Pepper was any indication, he didn’t exactly excel in the romance department.

He’d only actually witnessed James sleeping once, which totally didn’t count, because he’d been in another country at the time, and a StarkPad had been involved. It wasn’t like they were at the sharing a suite stage of things yet, but still, he’d observed James long enough now that he could easily recognize the anomaly he was being presented with.

1. James was sound asleep on the couch, in the common area;
2. he was more or less draped over a very concerned looking Steve;
3. Tony had entered said common area accompanied by an understandable level of noise, and had been speaking to Clint (okay, Clint had been talking him out of a full on panic attack) for about five minutes now, and yet James still hadn’t woken up.

“Any idea what triggered it?”

Tony couldn’t stop staring at James, wanting to run over and shake him awake, demand to know if he was okay. Not the best approach considering the night the guy had had, but the urge was pulling at his nerves much in the way (back before he knew better) he used to yank at the fabric of his father’s trousers, a child’s desperate plea for attention.

Clint shrugged, his expression suspiciously hangdog. “We were talking about guns we’ve loved,” he said hesitantly, quickly adding, “but we kind of do that a lot.”

Tony scrubbed a hand through his hair and over his face, trying to calm his jangled nerves. It’d been difficult enough, keeping the panic out of his voice when James had called to let him know about his little rooftop adventure with Clint. He’d managed it, just, by focusing on James, and reassuring him, and if he was suited up by the time the call ended then, well… no surprise there.

The flight back home hadn’t exactly been relaxing, despite JARVIS providing him with a feed of the
common area, showing him that James was fine, was with Clint and Steve, was still there, and not smashed to bits at the bottom of the Tower.

A horrible sort of anxiety propelled him along at speeds and trajectories that prompted JARVIS to remind him that it wasn’t exactly worth risking killing himself in order to get home three minutes sooner. Which, sure, great point, he could admit that, but it was hard to fight against the awful sense of urgency pounding in his head and heart, the one that synced up nicely with the *please be okay, please be okay* chant he had looping through his mind.

Physically being in the same place had helped a bit, but the longer James remained conked out on the couch, oblivious to the conversation and movement around him, the more Tony became convinced that something was horribly wrong, that he wasn’t ever going to wake up again, or he’d wake up and not recognize any of them.

Or maybe he’d open his eyes and then try to kill them all. James was big on insisting people be ready for him to flip into full on killing machine mode at any given moment, which Tony suspected was the underlying reason for the whole not wanting to share a bed thing.

“I doubt it was that,” Tony finally said, and Clint seemed to slump with relief. Tony shifted his focus off of James long enough to let Clint see the seriousness in his eyes. “Thanks, by the way.”

Clint shrugged, as if to brush it aside, so Tony placed a hand on his shoulder, gave it a squeeze, which at least got him a tight smile, and a nod. “Yeah. Been there, you know.”

“I know.”

“Hey, guys,” Steve whispered, “I think he’s waking up.”

It took all of Tony’s limited self control to keep from hurling himself at the couch, the *please be okay* chant cranking back up to full volume as he approached cautiously, head tilted a little to the side so he could better observe James’s features, hidden as they were behind the cascade of his hair.

He didn’t realize he was holding his breath until James was upright, and suddenly looking at him, a world of vulnerable and hurt in his eyes; then it was like the goddamned wormhole all over again, everything going cold and the air rushing out of his lungs, and Tony was going to be so cripplingly disappointed in himself if he broke down and had a panic attack.

“Hey, Pudding Pop,” he somehow managed to spit out, and was exceedingly proud at how normal he sounded.

There was a delay of what felt like a lifetime, but what was in reality probably only a handful of seconds, before James’s eyes focused, and he opened his mouth, and instead of asking who Tony was, or who he was for that matter, or anything awful like that, he said, “About time you got here.”

Tony let out a bark of relieved laughter, shoved his hands into his pockets, and rocked back on his heels, the picture of relaxation. “Hey, I’m a busy man, what can I say.”

“Right,” James drawled, getting up and slowly crossing the distance between them, the smile on his face clearly forced, but there. At least it was there. “Weren’t you debating whether or not to fly to another state for funnel cake when I called?”

“Like I said, busy.”

In his peripheral vision, Tony saw a Clint shaped blur rocket past him, but then he was distracted, because he had an armful of James, and *damn* but that was a relief. There was the rasp of stubble
against his neck as James tucked his face in as close as possible, exhaling shakily as Tony wrapped him up in the tightest hug he could manage, and just held on.

Peering over James’s shoulder, Tony spotted Clint heading back into the room, making a beeline for Steve. He leaned over the back of the couch in order to tap Steve on the shoulder, then hooked a thumb in the direction of the elevators. Steve met Tony’s eyes, concern for both of his friends evident. He wanted to stay, obviously, but Tony mouthed, “I got this,” and after a moment Steve nodded, and followed Clint.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, the shaking began, James trying to stay quiet while his tears slid hotly against Tony’s skin, almost ticklish as they worked their way down under his shirt collar.

“Bad one, huh?”

He felt James nod, but then he was pulling away, out of the embrace. His eyes were red rimmed, but still beautiful, and Tony felt his mouth twist in sympathy as he watched James swallow, and square up his shoulders, his expression shifting into a controlled blankness that reminded Tony of the first time Steve had brought him into the workshop.

“A mother and her kids,” he said, no emotion in his voice. “Two of them, little girls. I left their father to bleed out in the snow, but at least he had the bodies to keep him company.”

Tony knew what James was doing, saw it in every tight line, and tensed muscle. “Hey, depending on when it was, I might have made some cash off of the gun you used.”

James’s eyes narrowed as Tony stepped closer, but instead of hugging him, or kissing him (he really wanted to do both), Tony just kept walking, ultimately plopping himself down on the couch, kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

The moment stretched out, tension ratcheting, but eventually James spun around, irritation evident. “That’s it?”

Tony spread his arms wide, gave a little shrug, and settled back against the couch. “That’s all I got.”

“Kids!” James spat, and at least he’d left behind the disquieting blankness.

“I’m willing to bet more children have died because of me,” Tony countered. “Hey, you know, now that I think of it, I’m pretty sure I remember reading something in your file about brainwashing.”

James was pale, his eyes far more desperate than angry now. “I just had my head up my ass, busy living the good life.”

He waited, wanting to see if James would argue with him, but he remained silent, his eyes wild, face partially obscured by his hair. Tony could still make out the clenched jaw, the muscle twitching dangerously there, a match for the fists at his sides.

“I get it, you know,” Tony continued, letting the sadness, and no small measure of seriousness creep into his voice. “Needing to atone, hating yourself. Pushing people away. Sure, you want to be forgiven, but a bigger part of you is desperate to have someone—someone who matters—confirm you really are as worthless as you feel. It’d almost be a relief to hear it, because then you could give up, just…”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose, trying not to think of all the ways he’d almost killed himself over the years. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s just me. This is about you. I’ve read your files, James, and there’s nothing in there that’s going to scare me away, so you might as well stop trying.”
For a wild, awful moment, Tony sat there, watching as James’s facade of calm cracked wide open, left him raw, and exposed, and it was hard to witness. It made Tony want to get back in the armor, hunt down every last person who had even the tiniest involvement with the Winter Soldier project, and make them beg for mercy.

Instead, he waited, which was something he sucked at, waited even though he wanted to throw every last penny at James in an attempt to buy him happiness, wanted to throw himself at the man, as if that would fix anything. It made him feel selfish and awful for wanting James to just feel better, because it should hurt, it had to hurt, and there was no other way around the pain. Some things you just had to go right on through.

“Even your parents?” James asked.

The arc reactor felt heavy in Tony’s chest, and he resisted the urge to touch it, knowing it was working just fine. This pain was emotional in origin, something awful and jagged moving through him, so that his voice sounded far away and tinny to his own ears when he managed to get words past his lips.

“You know, in some ways, it’s better?” Tony had to bite his lip for a moment, stop the trembling. “Better than my mom being dead because dear old dad was drunk behind the wheel, at any rate.”

“Stark,” James began, and Tony held a hand up, cut him off.

“Don’t call me that, Bucky,” he snapped before he could stop himself. James’s eyes were wide with surprise, but he didn’t look away as Tony met his gaze head on. “HYDRA killed my parents. So yeah, even that, James. It didn’t scare me away, it just pissed me off, because…”

“Because?” and James sounded so scared, so alone. It was awful.

“Because I knew it would hurt you. Knowing. Even though it wasn’t your fault.”

“Clint,” James managed, his voice thick with tears, and this time when he straightened his shoulders, it was different. He cleared his throat, tried again. “Clint made me say that tonight. That it wasn’t my fault.”

Tony exhaled raggedly, feeling a strange sort of giddy panic, just happy they were moving away from talk of his father, of his mother. “Good. It isn’t.”

James took another step closer, then another, until he was standing in front of Tony, and then sank down to his knees. Unable to help himself, Tony leaned forward, reached for him, brushed his thumbs over James’s cheeks, trying to wipe away some of the tears. James grabbed hold of his wrists, held his hands in place, whispered, “He made me believe it.”

“That’s because it’s the truth,” Tony insisted.

He wondered if it had been this painful for Pepper and Rhodey over the years, seeing him tear himself to pieces, work himself to exhaustion. What a special sort of combination of awful; guilt, and self loathing, and drinking, oh my! The difference was, James was the only victim in the room.

“I think I want my hair cut.”

Tony blinked, his mind racing in several directions at once, until he blurted, “Your hair triggered the flashback?”

James nodded, sighing as Tony brushed the hair back from his face, as if that could somehow make
things better. Unable to hold out any longer, he kissed him, although it was on his forehead, then his
cheeks, and the stupid, impossibly endearing cleft of his chin.

James shifted against him, pulling him closer, slotting their mouths together, kissing Tony over, and
over again, his body relaxing, breath slowing with each moment that passed, until Tony pulled away,
saying, “Yeah, now? Right now? Or, whenever you want, really. Big deal rich guy, and I always
forget about haircuts, so Pepper has people pretty much all over the world ready, willing, and able to
drop everything in order to accommodate me so I don’t like look a prat in the tabloids. Well, more of
a prat than usual.”

“You’re babbling.” James, despite his red rimmed eyes, was smiling, and pulled Tony closer, helped
himself to another soft kiss.

“Fine, yes, you win,” Tony agreed. “My point is, say the word, and we’ll go, get it all taken care of.
Hey, maybe I’ll get one, too. We can match, it’ll be adorable.”

“I’d never hear the end of it,” James said, standing up and pulling Tony with him.

“Just promise me you won’t let Steve take you,” Tony asked, allowing himself to be led over to the
elevators. “Or Clint. Or Thor. Really, anyone other than me.”

“Yes, Antoshka.”

They road to Tony’s floor in silence, James standing closer than necessary, still holding onto Tony’s
hand, but it felt like something had changed, like some obstacle had been cleared. Although he felt
like he’d just finished a workout in the ring with Steve, and suspected James was somewhat in the
same boat, there was a strange, hopeful sort of happiness bubbling in Tony’s chest.

It was still there when they got to his floor, remained intact as James led him to the bedroom, stripped
down to his boxers, and climbed into Tony’s bed. And though he was full of nervous energy, and
part of him wanted to go hide in the workshop for a while, Tony followed suit, finding himself
suddenly cuddling with a former assassin.

“Hey, J, kill the lights, will ya?” James muttered, wrapping himself tighter around Tony as JARVIS
did as was asked.

And, somehow, the unfamiliar light feeling in Tony’s chest was still there (and, hey, look so was
James) when he woke up in the morning.
Chapter Summary

“No.”

Bucky pressed his lips together tightly in an attempt to keep himself from busting up laughing, because the look on Tony’s face was priceless.

“No. No? What do you mean, no?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No.”

Bucky pressed his lips together tightly in an attempt to keep himself from busting up laughing, because the look on Tony’s face was priceless.

“No. No? What do you mean, no?”

There just weren’t words to describe it, because Tony’s facial expressions were acrobatic at the best of times, but the mixture of irritation, surprise, confusion, and fear was just… Well, this was one of the things Bucky had come to realize he loved about the man. The little head shakes, and scrunched up faces, excited hand gestures coupled with squinty eyes that would suddenly go wide, followed by anything from what Clint had explained was “duck face” to Tony’s mouth hanging open in wonder or delight.

Natasha didn’t bother to repeat herself, simply arched one of her perfect eyebrows at Tony while she continued methodically destroying the last of the chocolate pudding.

“Hey, he’s my boyfriend,” Tony insisted, “so, logic dictates…”

“Natasha is right, Tony,” Steve interrupted, pausing before taking another bite of his sandwich. This caused Tony to pull an epic ‘Et tu, Brute?’ face, one that had Bucky glad his hair was still long enough to hide behind while he fought off his laughter. “Bucky is still under wraps, more or less, and you’re, well,” and Steve sounded legitimately apologetic here, “not.”

“This is unbelievable, you’re all totally not being believed by me right now.” Tony said, words tumbling out in quick succession. “I can, thank you, keep a low profile, uh, when I need to.”

Natasha set down her empty ramekin (impressively cleaned of every trace of pudding), then her spoon, which made a controlled, somehow ominous click as it came into contact with the surface of the table. The sound caused Tony to twitch as if she’d just chambered a round.

“Okay, fine, so I can’t think of an example for you, not off the top of my head, because—yeah—wasn’t exactly expecting to get railroaded at breakfast.”

“It’s three in the afternoon, Tony,” Steve felt the need to point out, smiling and shaking his head.
“My breakfast, I’m breaking my fast, so technically…”

“Does cold, leftover coffee count as breakfast?” Steve asked, glancing over to Bucky to share a smile, his eyes seemingly saying, ‘what can you do about this guy?’ in a good natured way.

“I did see some grounds in there,” Bucky pointed out, folding his arms across his chest. “So at least there’s something to chew.”

Tony looked apoplectic now, cradling his mug close to his chest, as if it might have overheard them, and been insulted.

“It’s still good, so why not make use of it while I wait?” He gestured wildly behind himself to the counter where a pot was slowly being filled with fresh, fragrant coffee. “Steve practically licks everyone’s plates clean in order not to waste food, and no one says anything!”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Steve muttered, while Tony continued on, oblivious.

“This is bullshit of the highest degree, and I call shenanigans on all of you.” He pointed at each of them in turn, looping back to Bucky for a second time. “Especially you, mister.”

Bucky gave up on hiding his smile, held both of his hands up in the air in surrender. “Hey, leave me out.”

“Too late. You’re in so deep there’s no getting you out again,” Tony insisted, finger jabbing in Bucky’s direction once more.

“That’s what she said,” Clint interjected merrily, causing Tony’s head to slump forward as he groaned in the direction of his sneakers. Clint gave him a playful little jab in the side as he headed for the fridge.

“Really, birdbrain? You appear from the shadows in yet another attempt to give me a heart attack, and that’s your big contribution?”

There was the quiet, purposeful sound of Natasha rising, pushing her chair in under the table, and then suddenly Tony was standing at attention again, mouth firmly closed, expression petulant, but resigned. Bucky almost felt bad for him.

“I’m taking him.”

“Will you at least let me pick the place?” Tony asked, clearly having moved on to Compromise Mode, his tone even, and respectful.

“No.”

He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything else, Natasha placed a finger over his lips, effectively silencing him. Shoulders slumping a bit, he pressed his mouth firmly closed again, folded his arms over his chest, and leaned back against the counter.

As Natasha began walking out of the room, Bucky followed, ruffling Tony’s hair as he passed, ignoring the way the man was glaring, lower lip shoved out to indicate his displeasure with this turn of events.

As he left, Bucky could hear Clint’s cry of, “Where’s all the pudding?” coming from behind him.

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It wasn’t until she was behind the wheel of Tony’s Bugatti and pulling out into New York traffic that Natasha spoke again, saying out of nowhere, “You’re good for him.”

Bucky found himself smiling, thinking again of Tony’s exaggerated pout as they’d left, regretting not having given him a little smack on the back of the head for good measure.

“You think?” Natasha gave him a look, and Bucky laughed. “Right, you wouldn’t have said so, otherwise.”

“I don’t think Fury has figured it out yet,” Natasha continued, “although Coulson had you two pegged from the start.”

Bucky studied her profile. It was strange to think of anyone pegging him for anything at ‘the start.’ Each of those first days had felt like years, years of having to tell himself to stay put for just a little longer, that it was the best place for him, considering the capabilities of the people around him. He’d had JARVIS lock him in on more than one occasion, just so the temptation to run wouldn’t be quite as strong.

He was sure Coulson had kept an eye on his movements, was aware of the lack of sleep, the night terrors when sleep was finally inevitable, the long hours spent staring at his own reflection, trying to recognize something, anything in his own eyes.

It was strange to think of someone witnessing all of this, and still, based on the very limited contact he’d had with the Tower’s residents during his first few weeks there, declare that he and Tony were going to wind up together.

“Are we sure he doesn’t have super powers?”

Natasha smiled at this, gave a little half shrug. “He’s a good observer.”

“So, what you’re saying is that it was painfully obvious, except to the two idiots involved.”

“Not exactly,” Natasha conceded. “Steve probably should have figured it out as soon as Stark started being more careful in the field, though.”

Bucky wasn’t sure what to say to that. JARVIS had helpfully provided him with news footage of the Avengers battle with the Chitauri, and he’d be lying if he said the sight of Tony disappearing into the wormhole hadn’t featured in more than one of his nightmares since seeing it.

He’d kind of thought of that sacrifice as a big one off, though. He didn’t have access to the comms or S.H.I.E.L.D.’s recordings of their battles, having to settle for whatever news coverage he could find instead, and they tended to focus more on Captain America than anything else.

Bucky immediately thought back to the conversation from a week prior that had spurred today’s outing, the night of his most recent flashback (Clint’s words, his actions getting through to him in ways he hadn’t expected), and the look that had been on Tony’s face when he spoke of giving up. It made him want to tell Natasha to turn the car around so he could go back, make sure he was okay, as if Tony was somehow in eminent danger of getting himself killed doing something (unnecessarily) heroic.

“Hey,” Natasha said, simultaneously interrupting and reading his thoughts. “He’s fine.”

With a bit of effort, Bucky forced himself to relax, realizing his hands were gripping his thighs tightly enough that his flesh and blood hand was white knuckled.
“Was he…” he bit his lip, cutting off the question before he could ask it, discomfort winning out over curiosity.

“It was different with Pepper,” Natasha answered anyway, and Bucky shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “She loved him, but she never needed him.”

But I do, was the first thought that popped into Bucky’s head at this, because he did. It worried him sometimes, because needing was dangerous, might not even be healthy, but Tony acted like he needed him, too, and somehow that made it okay.

“Don’t overthink it,” Natasha continued, whipping through the traffic with a devilish smile. “Just keep on doing whatever it is you’re doing, because it’s working.”

“Right.” He took a deep breath, counted to ten, exhaled, took another, and felt a bit better. “I’ve gotten so used to feeling like shit that being happy feels dangerous.”

“I know.”

Bucky fished his phone out of his pocket, tapped off a message, hit send, and stared out the window again. “So, Fury.”

“Steve and Phil will handle it when the time comes,” she answered smoothly. “You’ll still get a lecture on fraternization.” This gave him pause, but before he could ask, Natasha added, “It’s only a matter of time before you’re an Avenger.”

The idea was as exciting as it was terrifying. He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t known that was the plan, way down the line. He wouldn’t be able to say no if Steve asked him, and they both knew it. Being on the team meant being able to actually keep an eye on Tony, and Steve, and the rest of his makeshift family, rather than sitting behind in the Tower during their battles, waiting to hear whether anyone was injured, or worse.

It was the other side of the coin that left him with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, the idea of lining someone up in his crosshairs, and pulling the trigger. It had been surreal enough during the war, realizing how good he was at something so very wrong. The years after certainly hadn’t helped matters any.

Steve had roped him into weekly sparring sessions as of late, and as much as his body rejoiced in the combat, as good as it felt to disconnect part of his brain and let his muscle memory and training take over, there was still the feeling of something wild and uncontrollable inside of him, begging to be taken off the chain and let loose. Worse still, that feeling had nothing to do with the Winter Soldier, and everything to do with James Buchanan Barnes.

“Not sure how I feel about that.”

“Not sure you have to feel anything about it right now,” she countered. “You’re not ready yet. But you will be.”

Bucky’s phone vibrated in his hand, and he looked down to see, Already over it. Don’t let Nat talk you into a dye job. Also, not sure I can take mullets seriously. Avoid hockey hair at all cost. And just like that, the melancholy slipped further away.

“What’s hockey hair?” he asked, and beside him Natasha laughed loudly.

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It wasn’t until they were there that Bucky realized Natasha and Steve had been right, and it was better that Tony had stayed behind. The salon was crowded, and he and Natasha got looks from a fair number of the patrons as they entered together. She assured him they were checking him out for reasons that had nothing to do with his arm, which was hidden under his shirt and glove, but that didn’t make him feel any better about it.

If Tony had taken two steps into the place, people would have been snapping photos with their phones, and it all would have gone downhill from there. By the time they finished up, it’d wind up on one of the trashy tabloid news shows Clint was so fond of watching—Who Is Tony Stark’s Mysterious New Boy Toy?—which was just about the last thing Bucky needed.

Spending most of his time in the Tower as he did, it was easy for Bucky to forget Tony was a celebrity. He’d seen some of the press conferences, but that world and the Tony he saw on the TV felt disconnected from the man he spent so much of his time with.

The salon had little in common with the barber shops of Bucky’s past, and he was content to allow Natasha to do the talking, just sit there and focus on remaining calm, trying to channel his inner Bruce. Logically, he knew none of the people around him were a threat, but he brought danger with him wherever he went, wrapped up tightly inside of himself.

It was mildly disturbing, yet equally familiar, having a stranger touch him in order to get a feel for the texture of his hair, pulling it up and away from his face while chatting with Natasha, before sending him back to have it washed. Then it was yet another stranger, their fingers working shampoo into his hair, massaging his scalp, trying to make small talk and getting nowhere. The position left him with his throat bared, head tipped back, warm water and pleasant smells doing little to calm the wild beating of his heart.

Natasha remained within his line of sight, a red haired beacon of hope in his peripheral vision, something to focus on instead of the sound of the scissors, or the proximity of them to his face. The fact that he was able to remain relatively calm throughout the experience was testament to his faith and trust in Natasha; she wasn’t about to let any harm come to him. He distracted himself with reviewing his potential pathways for escape, items nearby that could be used as weapons, reminded himself again and again that Natasha was capable of incapacitating him if something happened.

Only nothing happened, except that slowly, he found himself focusing on the person he saw reflected in the mirror opposite, no longer hidden behind dark strands of hair. Handsome enough. Nice eyes, if a little sad, a little lost looking. It wasn’t Steve’s Bucky, or HYDRA’s Winter Soldier he saw, but someone else.

He wondered how Tony would react to the new look—he’d seemed to enjoy playing with the longer hair, now that Bucky thought about it—and just like that, his expression shifted, and the person in the mirror looked like he had a place in the world, less like a ghost, and more like him.

“Well whaddya know,” he said quietly, and beside him, Natasha made a soft, amused noise.

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“Allow me to be the first in the Tower to compliment you on your new hairstyle, sir,” JARVIS intoned pleasantly once Bucky and Natasha entered the elevator. “It quite suits you.”

“Thanks, J.”

“I’m happy to smack Clint if he carries on,” Natasha offered, noticing how JARVIS’s words had made Bucky squirm and rub a hand self consciously over the back of his neck. “Just give the word.”
He shrugged, trying to play it off. “It’s just a haircut,” but they both knew how exposed he felt, even though he liked the new look. He’d get used to the change soon enough, but for right now, the less attention the better.

Of course, as expected, when they entered the common area, everyone gathered around in order to get a look, Thor almost knocking him over with a brotherly slap on the back.

“I shall miss braiding your hair of an evening, my friend,” he proclaimed, “but fear not! You are still quite pleasing to the eye.”

“Thanks,” and it was hard not to laugh at this, especially with one of Steve’s arms around his shoulders, as he said, “I think we’ll all miss Thor braiding your hair.”

One person was conspicuously absent, though, and that was Tony. As he allowed himself to be dragged over to the couches, Bucky decided he’d give it twenty minutes or so before he went and found the man; he was probably lost in the middle of a project, unaware of how much time had passed.

“I still think a mohawk was the way to go,” Clint lamented, shaking his head and pointing the remote at Bucky for emphasis. “Missed opportunity, big time.”

To Bucky, it felt like all eyes were on him, despite his friends’ obvious attempts to avoid being blatant about their staring, so it was a relief when he heard the elevator hum to life behind him. Clint glanced over as the doors opened, then did a double take, his eyes wide.

“What the everloving fuck?” he said, just as Tony announced loudly, “I don’t care how good you look, consider yourself officially outdone, James.”

Clint was on his feet even as Bucky turned on the couch in order to see what the fuss was about, the room erupting in chatter. Any lingering concerns Bucky had about being the center of attention for the rest of the evening were wiped off the map the second he saw Tony, who had also gotten a haircut, but more importantly, perhaps…

“Anthony, your mighty beard!” Thor bellowed.

“You shaved,” Clint added unnecessarily, as Tony basked in the attention.

Bucky found himself smiling a little wider each time Tony’s eyes darted over to gauge his reaction. He slowly made his way around the couch in order to join the group, ignoring the banter between Tony and Clint, focused instead on the heavy thumping of his own heart.

Personally, he liked Tony’s beard, but there was something compelling about seeing him clean shaven, especially knowing Tony had done it to draw unwanted attention off of himself. Unable to help himself, and not feeling particularly inclined to be shy, Bucky grabbed hold of Tony’s tie and used it to pull him in close, dropping a kiss onto his mouth.

“Well, hello,” Tony purred.

It was strange, not feeling the beard, the naked smoothness of the skin around his mouth prompting Bucky to do it again, which in turn caused Clint to make exaggerated gagging noises before returning to bask in the glow of the television, the others following suit.

“You like?” Tony asked. He curled a hand around the nape of Bucky’s neck, worked his fingers into the short hairs there, sending shivers down his spine. Bucky cupped Tony’s face and kissed him again by way of answering, tugging on Tony’s lower lip with his teeth.
“I like. It’s different,” Bucky said softly. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m a fan of the beard.”

“It’ll be back,” Tony said, running his fingers through Bucky’s hair, tousling it playfully, a goofy smile on his face. Bucky felt himself smiling in return as Tony added, “You look great, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

Tony waggled his eyebrows, saying, “Ah ah, I should be thanking you; I’m the one who gets to look at you, after all.”

Bucky brought his mouth to Tony’s ear, saying softly, “You know what I’m talking about.”

An actual look of embarrassment flitted across his features for a moment before he got it under wraps, and it made Bucky unreasonably happy to have spotted it. “Yeah, well, unlike some people, I enjoy being the center of attention.”

It was painfully clear their friends were trying their best to ignore their quiet, intimate conversation. Bucky considered making it even easier on them by dragging Tony into the elevator in order to head somewhere more private, but his stomach chose that moment to grumble loudly, causing Tony to laugh.

“Right, that won’t do,” Tony said, rubbing his hands together. “Clint,” he shouted, ignoring the, “dude, I’m right here, why are you shouting?” he got in response, continuing on with, “time to order take out! Get The Hat of Choosing.”

A cheer went up from Thor and Clint, a groan from Steve, who suggested he could just cook instead, while Natasha reminded everyone that it was Bruce’s turn to pick from the hat. Bucky felt his smile get a little wobbly at the edges, hit upside the heart by the realization that—despite everything awful that had happened to him, or to others because of him—somehow, this was his home, and these people were his family. 

Thankfully, before he could get too overwhelmed, Tony gave him a playful smack on the ass on his way back into the living room.

Chapter End Notes

Just so you know, Bucky is totally going to let his hair grow back, because I'm a total sucker for the long hand, and Thor wants to braid it, so... Would you deny Thor what he wants? I didn't think so!
Tony gasped, holding on with an unexpected amount of desperation, because for the life of him he just couldn’t get a handle on this, couldn’t get his bearings at all, and he was Tony goddamned Stark —this didn’t happen to him!

Technically, it was the polar opposite of one of his panic attacks, completely and utterly, but it was the same sort of overwhelming, and unexpected, his heart racing for entirely different reasons. Really, he shouldn’t be complaining, because damn did that feel good, but still, it was all just so much, and…

“Hey,” and it made him feel at least a little better to hear how completely wrecked James sounded, his voice raw, and low, the word coming out in a hot puff against Tony’s neck. James shifted, his mouth sliding up along Tony’s jaw, a sort of sucking, stuttering movement over his chin, and then Tony just had to whimper, because how could he not, as James rocked forward, slotting their mouths together for a quick kiss, his stupid, beautiful eyes just right there, watching, waiting patiently for permission.

“Hey yourself,” Tony answered, hating how vulnerable he sounded, why was he sounding vulnerable of all things?

The problem was, James wouldn’t stop with the eye fucking, which was messing with Tony’s head a bit, if he was being honest. It shouldn’t, and he knew it shouldn’t (they actually were fucking, which, hello!) but it did, because he was pretty sure there were things James was seeing in his eyes right now that…

“Everything okay?”

See, and that was it, right there, and it wasn’t fair! This wasn’t his first rodeo, not by a longshot, but it was James’s first time being on this side of the equation, so between the two of them Tony fucking Stark wasn’t the one who should be more than a little freaked out by what was happening.

“Yeah, yeah,” he swore, and slid his hand up the cool expanse of James’s bionic arm, cupped the back of his head, and pulled him across the last little divide between them so they could kiss again. It was wet, and sloppy—totally a mess of a kiss—because he was feeling frantic, and couldn’t seem to get his head around this, not even close.

But maybe he didn’t have to, maybe he could just let go of that last bit of control, just dive headfirst into this feeling of being completely laid bare. He could have his freakout later, and right now just, yeah, just slide his hands into James’s hair, swallow his little groan of pleasure at this, and if he rocked his hips, then…

“Very okay, all kinds of okay, but you... fuck, seriously, have to move or I might actually die.”

When James laughed, Tony felt it reverberate through his entire body, down to his toes even, and
that was it. He just gave up. So what, this wasn’t going to be like any other time with any other person, and it shouldn’t be, it definitely shouldn’t be, and he didn’t need to think right now about why that was, and what it meant, and how much trouble he was in here.

James shifted them, never letting go of Tony’s hips as he repositioned the both of them so he could stand at the end of the bed, Tony’s legs wrapped around him. It was insane how effortless the movement was, like Tony weighed nothing at all, like this wasn’t the most overwhelming situation ever, James buried deep inside of him, and still watching his face with an intensity that was as alarming as it was compelling.

Thankfully, James took mercy on him, and pretty much destroyed his ability to think coherently when he finally, finally, began rocking himself in and out of Tony’s body. It was too slow at first, and panic began to flare up inside Tony’s chest again, because he really didn’t want to turn into a gibbering mess. He kind of wanted to live up to his reputation for once.

Maybe James saw all of this in his eyes, in the way he was biting into his lower lip, and trembling against the sheets, because the next thrust was deep, and purposeful, and made Tony cry out loudly, a sort of needy, pathetic noise that he felt embarrassed by right up until he saw the way it made James’s expression shift. His eyelids fluttered just a bit, and there was so much warmth there, and affection, and ownership. James was smiling this cocky little smile (he’d had the same smile on his face the first time they’d gotten naked together), as he began more or less fucking Tony into the mattress.

Then it was just absolutely perfect, blindingly perfect, like when he became fully immersed in his work and the rest of the world fell away, just him and a universe to build, only it was better, because his thoughts couldn’t go anywhere else; everything tilted on its axis and there was only James, and him, and the feeling of them joined together. He could become addicted to this.

It would probably come as a surprise to no one at all to learn that Tony’s mind was always going. It was one of the reasons drinking had been so appealing—it didn’t necessarily stop the neverending layers of thought, but it slowed them down, left them sort of colliding into each other in a way that prevented him from ever being able to reign them in, which in and of itself was a sad sort of liberation.

Really, he loved his mind, loved the way it worked, except for all of the times he hated it, because while being a genius was fun, it also left him unable to connect with most people in some pretty basic ways. That was the opposite of liberating.

He’d always found sex to be a spectacular distraction, but if he was being honest, even some of the best sex he’d had he hadn’t been entirely present for. Even with Pepper, and he’d loved Pepper. She was beautiful, and strong, and perfectly wonderful, and it had made him hurt just looking at her, because he knew he’d never be good enough for her.

But even with Pepper, there had been a little disconnected bit of Tony’s mind that was always whirring away in the background, unable to just stop and be in the moment. It probably had something to do with the sense of impending doom he could never seem to shake when they were together, the one he was always overcompensating for—even in their happiest moments together, he was aware there would soon come a day when Pepper wouldn’t be able to compromise anymore, not if she was going to have the happy life she deserved, and so, yeah. There was that.

So, yes, he’d loved Pepper, but he’d almost gone out of his way to rush them along towards their breakup, because she deserved the sort of future he’d never wanted for himself, and the sooner she realized that, the sooner he could climb back inside a bottle, lose himself in the workshop, or put on the armor and get to work atoning for the legacy of pre-Afghanistan Tony Stark. And if atoning
meant being a little too enthusiastic when it came to putting himself at risk, well, at least he wouldn’t have to have lengthy, teary conversations about it anymore.

There was all that, all the baggage he seemed to carry with him, but then there was this. There was James, who was also beautiful, but he wasn’t perfect in the way Pepper was. He was a completely different, broken sort of amazing that Tony couldn’t seem to resist. James was the type of strong and wonderful that scared Tony for entirely different reasons, because Tony (didn’t want to) couldn’t see that eventual end on the horizon when they were together. James didn’t need to compromise anything; he just accepted Tony the way he was, and somehow managed to look at Tony like he was perfect. Insane, really, when you thought about it.

The first time James had kissed him, Tony had been over the moon, mostly focused on the fact that he finally knew what James's mouth felt like—he’d been jerking off to the thought of that mouth for a while, and it was nice to confirm through first hand experience that it felt as good as it looked.

It was the morning after, though, waking up next to him on the couch, his neck all stiff and his face jammed into James’s armpit, feeling an awful combination of jet lagged and hung over, that he’d really had the opportunity to think about what they had set it motion, and recognize how much he wanted it.

James was a light sleeper, and Tony wasn’t afforded any time to watch him doze, was pinned by those deep, beautiful eyes almost the instant he sat up. His head was pounding, and his mouth felt like it was full of sand, but he was almost stupidly, inappropriately happy. This feeling only grew when James smirked at him, shook his head in response to Tony’s goofy grin, and said, “You look like something the cat dragged in,” before pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Once he got a look at himself in the mirror, it was hard to disagree. He had creases on his face from James's shirt, a wicked case of bed head, dark circles under his bloodshot eyes, and really needed to neaten up his beard. If anything, it made him smile more, reinforced the decision he had come to only moments before.

“Hey JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Thinking I might call it quits with the bottle.”

“An excellent idea, sir.”

“M’full of ‘em,” Tony murmured as he headed into the shower.

Of course, with the way his life went, it shouldn’t have been surprising that he’d hardly managed to finish brushing his teeth before they got the call to assemble, and then the next thing he knew he was flying into a building and getting yelled at by Captain America, all because of Clint’s big mouth.

The next time he’d seen James, they’d been in an alleyway, and he’d come fresh from a Serious Conversation (capital letters totally required) with Steve, was still feeling shitty about it, because of course Cap had noticed he was hung over, and naturally Tony wound up more or less yelling about his feelings for James, and his decision to go sober, and how important Steve’s friendship (approval) was to him, all right in Steve’s face, like it was Steve’s fault.

“I’m not good enough for your best friend, is that it?” he’d asked, terrified of how Steve would answer, because if he said yes, then…

But Steve had just looked confused, then angry, and then a little sad, had grabbed him by the
shoulder. “Tony. No, of course not,” it was the earnestness, the affectionate exasperation in the way he said Tony’s name that made his eyes tear up a bit. “Anyone with half a brain could see how good you’ve been for Bucky. I was just… Well, feeling a little left out, honestly.”

“Left out?”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, you know that?” Steve had fully deployed the puppy dog eyes, all sad and earnest.

“My S.H.I.E.L.D. assessment would beg to differ.”

“You… You know you’re my best friend too, right?”

Tony felt too much like shit to admit that no, he hadn’t known that, not in the least. He’d sort of assumed the warm and fuzzies were more or less one sided. He knew Steve had accepted him, that he enjoyed working with him, and hanging out now, but best friend status? Nope. Not a clue.

“I don’t know how I would have made it through those early days if you hadn’t been around.”

“You would have managed,” Tony insisted.

“Maybe. But maybe not.”

When he’d eventually gotten the heads up from JARVIS that James had left the Tower, and wasn’t responding, Tony resigned himself to the fact that he’d yet to meet his Serious Conversation quota for the day. Hoped the evening wouldn’t end with him crying on Steve’s shoulder, the whole thing blowing up in his face before it even got started.

Instead, things had gone surprisingly well. An actual talk, involving feelings, and the realization that James was worried that Tony might not want him, which, yeah, insane. So they’d eaten, and talked, and it was kind of scary to realize he didn’t want to sabotage things this time around, didn’t want to push James away, or protect him from the fallout of spending prolonged periods of time in close proximity with Tony Stark. He just wanted to protect him.

He’d probably already been a bit head over heels before they’d actually become a couple, and the hours, and days, and weeks, they spent together after making it official had been the happiest he could ever recall being. So, really, it was sort of ridiculous that it wasn’t until today—with James’s eyes drinking him in, and his cock reshaping Tony’s universe one thrust at a time—that he finally understood how very much batshit crazy in love with this man he was.

James was hot everywhere, except the arm, which was cool, and totally hadn’t stopped being a turn on if Tony was being honest with himself. He splayed his bionic hand over the arc reactor in order to pin Tony down against the bed, and there should have been panic over that move (he hated when anyone touched it, even Pepper, even Steve), but there wasn’t, because James only ever touched the reactor with that hand, and somehow that made it okay, every single time.

“Look at you,” James all but growled. He slid his hand down Tony’s chest, caressed the trembling muscles in Tony’s stomach. “Is it bad that I want to cover you with marks?”

“No, that’s, uh, good,” Tony moaned, grinning wildly up at James. “S’great. Mark away, I’m all yours.”

The look on James’s face at that was something to behold, made Tony’s cock twitch against his stomach, and his heart hammer wildly. He was pretty sure he wasn’t the only one batshit crazy in love, here, and wasn’t that just one for the record books?
James slowed the pace down for a just a moment, just long enough to suck and bite greedily at the curve of Tony’s shoulder, until he was satisfied that the mark would last. Then they were kissing again, loud and sloppy as they each tried to manage their chaotic breathing.

Tony moved his legs, draping them over James’s broad shoulders, soft noises of pleasure escaping in time with each thrust of James’s cock. If his eyes began to drift closed, James would move his hands from Tony’s hips in order to cradle his face, force him to open his eyes again, bend Tony’s knees up by his ears so he could lean over enough to kiss him.

It was strange how James could look so intense, while simultaneously appearing to be the most relaxed Tony had ever seen him, cheeky grin never leaving his face for long. Tony’s Russian was apparently not up to snuff (note to self, learn to talk dirty in Russian), because a lot of what was coming out of James’s mouth at the moment was going right over his head.

He had no idea how long they’d been at it, only that his balls felt heavy, and every last nerve ending seemed to be screaming at him to touch his own dick already. James beat him to it (no pun intended), shifting Tony’s legs again so he had more room to work, holding him down, his cool, metallic hand feeling like a brand, while the other wrapped around Tony’s cock, began pumping enthusiastically.

“I wanna see you come,” James managed, his voice strained, and his eyes blazing.

“Yes, sir.”

Tony didn’t need to be told twice, happily wrapped both hands around his own cock and got to work, while James grabbed him by the hips and rode him hard, lifting Tony’s ass ever so slightly off the mattress. Tony started babbling, didn’t have a clue what about, because James had obviously paid attention during the times Tony had fucked him, and as a result the head of his cock was absolutely nailing Tony’s prostate on each thrust.

James was watching intensely, attention divided between Tony’s busy hands and his face, and although he greedily observed the first stuttering spurts of Tony’s orgasm, groaning loudly at the feeling of Tony clenching down on him as he covered himself with come, he mostly maintained dizzying eye contact throughout.

Tony was sure whatever he was saying was embarrassingly stupid (c’mon, James, wanna walk funny tomorrow, fuck, come for me, yeah, you feel so fucking good) as he reached up to frame James’s face with his hands, unwilling (unable) to look away, and so he saw it all right there (do you have any idea how much I love you? god, I hope so, James, because I can’t go back to not having you) in James’s eyes when it happened, saw the dam break, even as James’s hips lost their rhythm, jerking wildly into Tony as he came, and came, with a shout of, “Antoshka.”

James sort of collapsed on top of him after that, taking a moment to collect himself before pulling out, and flopping onto his back beside Tony. The room was full of the sound of their heavy breathing, James naturally recovering much sooner, while Tony yawned against his will, shivering a bit now that he was no longer up close and personal with James’s body heat.

Before he could drift into unconsciousness, James chuckled, and Tony arched an eyebrow, turning to glare at him. He opened his mouth to complain, but then James held his hand up for a high five, and soon they were both laughing.

“So that happened,” Tony managed eventually, feeling much more content now that James had manhandled him up to the head of the bed, dragging them both under the covers.

He didn’t get to say anything else, because James was kissing him again, slowly, deeply, then pulled
away and said, “Do you, Tony? Do you have any idea?” and Tony shivered in spite of how warm he was, his heart feeling like it’d actually stopped in his chest, because James looked wrecked.

“Hey, what’s…”

But he was cut off again, as James began talking, his words coming fast, his eyes bright, and vulnerable. “You made me feel human again, do you have any idea… That should have been impossible, Antoshka, but you did it before I even knew what was happening. I don’t know how you did that.”

In a moment of clarity, Tony realized he’d managed to be incredibly cliche, and had confessed his feelings for James at some point during all the sex-babble, and that James was in the process of reciprocating.

“It’s okay,” Tony swore, brushing James’s hair back from his forehead. “Of course I know, I’m a genius, remember?”

“Punk,” James laughed, the tears in his eyes finally spilling over when he did so, his mouth trembling as he smiled. “I’m trying to tell you I love you over here.”

“Yeah, well, I love you, too,” Tony answered, giving James a playful shove. “And of course you love me, I’m very lovable.”

James was still smiling, which was good, because it meant Tony’s heart could beat normally again, and that he could just stroke the side of James’s face, and try not to freak out over the amount of gratitude he could see in the other man’s eyes. Tony was beginning to think that maybe he didn’t suck at relationships at all, maybe he’d just been in the wrong ones up until now.

“Humble, too.”

“Very humble,” Tony agreed. “which is good, considering how staggeringly attractive I am. It’d be a shame if that went to my head.”

“No wonder I love you.”

“My point exactly.” He tried, and failed, to suppress another yawn, ignoring the quiet, amused sound James made beside him. “JARVIS, don’t let me sleep past… uh, what time is it, anyway?”

“Two thirty six p.m., sir.”

“Wait, it’s daytime?” Tony sat up, looking at the clock beside the bed, as if JARVIS could possibly have been mistaken about something as simple as the time. “Is it still Wednesday?”

“It was Wednesday when you started on Clint’s,” James trailed off, then said, “JARVIS, a little help?”

“I believe sir referred to it as the My Little Pwn Thee© Gaming System of Ultimate Domination,” JARVIS helpfully provided, his tone making it clear that Tony had been operating on far too much caffeine, and far too little sleep when coming up with the name.

“Right. That. It was Thursday when I decided to just throw you over my shoulder, and carry you up here so I could fuck you stupid.”

Tony’s eyes widened at this. “Huh. Did I finish it?”
“Clearly my plan worked.”

“You did indeed complete your project sir. Congratulations.”

“Right, well… good.” Tony settled back down against the pillows. “What do you think, is the name marketable?” He didn’t wait for James to answer, just muttered, “Pepper usually hates the names I come up with for the awesome shit I invent.”

With the bionic hand, James tapped three times against the arc reactor before snuggling closer. “Stop thinking and go to sleep.”

“Yeah, okay, I can do that.”

And he did.
“Make it stop, or I break it.”

“Yeah, up, I’m up, I got it,” Tony mumbled, his hand smacking against the wood of the bedside table several times as he fumbled for his phone. Bucky gave him another shove, and Tony let out an undignified squeak, but finally managed to get hold of the phone. Bucky sighed in relief as the terrible ringing ceased.

“Y’ello?”

“Ten fucking minutes,” Bucky grumbled after glancing at the clock, pulling the pillow over his head.

A long day had turned into a long night, everyone suffering from a post-battle high that had resulted in actually agreeing to Tony’s suggestion of visiting his favorite karaoke joint as a team building exercise. There had been singing, drinking (for Clint, Thor, and Natasha anyway), and critical levels of ridiculous one-upmanship. Thankfully, Tony had arranged for a private lounge, otherwise most of the evening would have wound up on YouTube. Eventually, they could no longer ignore the exhaustion, and had to call it a night. Or day, technically. Again.

As a group, they’d staggered back to the Tower, cursing the sunshine while everyone took turns describing how much sleep they were going to get once they managed to get home, and arguing about when and what they should have JARVIS order them for breakfast.

Of course, as soon as Bucky and Tony were alone together, plans for sleep were tossed aside along with their clothing, some of which was still in the elevator, now that Bucky was thinking about it. The sex had been quick, and just the right amount of rough, desperate, and messy. Bucky was still surprised they’d managed to clean up and make it into the bed at all, afterwards.

He’d just been drifting off, Tony snoring softly beside him, already dead to the world... And then Tony’s awful, awful phone had started ringing.

“Hey, no, it’s fine,” Tony said, his voice low and gravelly, a side effect of too much singing, and not enough sleep.

Bucky pulled the pillow off of his head, wanting his glare of disapproval to be fully visible, because he disagreed vehemently with Tony’s assessment of the interruption being “fine.” Tony missed it, because he was sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows braced on his knees, his head propped upright by the hand not holding the phone.

As Bucky watched, Tony straightened up, saying, “Seriously, anytime, you know that. What’s wrong?”

There was a pause—Bucky couldn’t quite make out what was being said on the other end of the line, but he’d recognized Pepper’s ringtone—before Tony spoke again. “Zürich? Wait, I wasn’t supposed to... Okay, good, I don’t actually... Well, there are lots of places I’m supposed to be Pep, I can’t be
expected to keep track of them all. What day is it, anyway? Right, good.”

Bucky’s curiosity was piqued, mostly because Tony no longer sounded asleep, his tone fluctuating somewhere between obedient child, spoiled brat, and concerned lover. Whatever it was, Bucky hated hearing it.

“Yeah, no, of course I’ll come,” he said, glancing over at the clock as he stood up. “This isn’t an omelette talk is it, because I… Okay, right. No, no, gimme, shit, I dunno. Ten hours? Hang on, JARVIS?”

“You will be able to depart within the hour, sir, with an estimated flight time of eight hours.”

“Thanks, J. So, yeah… Call it ten, to be on the safe side.” Tony shuffled around in the dark, head down, apparently looking for his discarded clothing, but gave up after a moment. “Okay, Pepper, you’re freaking me out here. Is this an emergency, or not? If you’re dying, I’m getting in the suit… Okaaaaay, then I’m taking the jet. So I can sleep! You’re always telling me that’s a thing people do that I should do more of.”

Tony wandered into the closet, and with a low growl of irritation, Bucky sat up and turned on the bedside lamp. When Tony finally emerged he was thankfully no longer on the phone. He’d pulled on a dress shirt, and suit jacket—neither of which were buttoned—draped a tie around his shoulders, a pair of pants over one arm, and the fact that he hadn’t found underwear yet, and had several visible love bites scattered across his abdomen really brought the whole look together. It would have been hilarious, if Bucky wasn’t busy grinding his teeth, and counting down from ten in his head.

“Let me guess. You’re going to Zürich?”

Tony at least had the decency to look apologetic. He tossed the pants over the back of a chair, then crawled across the bed in order to plant a kiss on Bucky’s shoulder before flopping down mostly on top of him, face smashed against Bucky’s stomach as he made a loud, pathetic, whining sound.

What Bucky wanted to do was smack him on the back of the head. He was tired, and cranky, and, if he was being honest, jealous. It was the jealous bit that was really bothering him the most. In an attempt to rise above his feelings, he forwent the smack, settling for sinking his fingers into Tony’s thick hair instead.

There were some noises that might have been words. “Didn’t catch that.”

With another groan, Tony rolled onto his back, looking up at Bucky forlornly. “Come with me?” Bucky wanted to say no out of spite, and Tony must have seen it in his eyes, because suddenly he was all seriousness, and Bucky realized Tony was scared. “She won’t say, but it can’t be good if it can’t wait and she won’t tell me over the phone.”

“How long will we be there?”

The relief that washed over Tony’s face made Bucky feel like an asshole for even considering declining the offer. “Nope. But, hey, let’s try to make it a mini vacation! Pack enough for a couple days, at least, or don’t and we’ll buy new stuff when we get there. I don’t care, either way is fine.”

As if worried Bucky was going to change his mind, Tony scrambled out of the bed, and started dressing again. Moving a little slower, Bucky went about doing the same, up until Tony caught him around the waist, and hugged him tightly from behind. He nuzzled Bucky’s neck, saying, “Thank you,” and just like that, whatever remaining tension he had been holding onto dissipated.

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Exhaustion had won out, and despite his normal inability to sleep in strange places, Bucky had found himself blissfully unconscious for the duration of the flight to Switzerland. As soon as they’d disembarked, a car was whisking them off to the hotel where Pepper was staying, which—surprise, surprise—also happened to be where they were staying.

Bucky had handled the whole checking in process, feeling woefully underdressed standing in the lobby wearing his hoodie and jeans, while Tony fiddled with his phone, letting Pepper know they’d arrived. The couple had parted ways in the elevator, Bucky pressing one of the key cards into Tony’s hand with a tight smile, and for the last three hours and eighteen minutes he’d been sitting in their hotel room, waiting for Tony to return.

This left him with plenty of time to think, so he pulled out his deck of cards, dealt a hand of solitaire, and got busy thinking. The thing was, Bucky knew he had no reason to be jealous of Pepper, which was why his inability to suppress the reaction was so annoying in the first place.

By the time he’d met Tony, he and Pepper had already called things off, and although Tony had admitted they’d had “maybe we made a mistake… wait, no we didn’t” sex a handful of times post-breakup, even that had been a thing of the past by the time Bucky had come along.

She’d moved on. Tony had moved on. And yet, she could call, and just like that, Tony was dropping everything to fly to another country in order to talk to her. Bucky tried to remind himself that Tony would have done the same for Rhodes, or any of the Avengers—he had gone without close friends for most of his life, and tended to go all in with the ones he had now, as if making up for years of lost time.

The conclusion Bucky came to while waiting for Tony to return was that he needed to get to know Pepper better. She was one of Tony’s best friends, and a big part of his life, but so was he, and somehow, they’d only ever been in the same room two or three times, tops.

He was pretty sure Tony wasn’t keeping them apart on purpose. These days, he mostly only saw Pepper during business related excursions anyway, and Bucky hadn’t exactly been doing much traveling since he and Tony had met.

Even after S.H.I.E.L.D. had declared him safe for public consumption, it had taken months for him to feel confident enough in himself to start spending time outside of the Tower alone. That had slowly evolved into some training trips with various members of the team, which had eventually led to his first, actual mission as an Avenger, and so on, and so forth.

Really, now that he was thinking about it, this little jaunt with Tony was the farthest he’d been from the Tower since moving in there. This time last year, he would have been overwrought with anxiety at the idea of something like this, so he took a moment to congratulate himself on the progress he’d made before refocusing on the issue at hand.

Pepper Potts.

He didn’t know where he stood with her, and that bothered him. She’d been polite, the few times they’d talked, but it was obvious to Bucky that she didn’t know what to make of him. In the beginning, that made perfect sense. He didn’t know what to make of himself, so it was pointless to worry about Pepper’s opinion; of course she wasn’t going to be thrilled about Tony getting involved with a disturbed and unstable former assassin.

The thing was, they had stayed together, he was far less disturbed now (he had the papers to prove it and everything), and he knew for a fact that he made Tony happy. He’d stopped drinking, was much less likely to beheroically reckless, and yet Bucky still got the feeling Pepper didn’t take their
relationship seriously. At all.

So, obviously, they needed to get to know each other better. Maybe she’d let him take her to lunch while they were here, and he could put her mind at ease, explain how much he loved Tony, and that he wasn’t going anywhere. If she was Tony’s friend, she’d respect that, which meant he wouldn’t ever find himself in a situation like this again—sitting in a hotel room waiting for Tony to return with the news that Pepper had secretly birthed Tony’s love child, and now wanted them to be a big, happy family.

It was worth mentioning it was Clint’s fault that the idea of a surprise child occurred to Bucky in the first place. One of his hobbies was trolling the Avengers threads on various message boards, and when he wasn’t cracking them up over dinner by sharing the ridiculous rumors he’d come across (Tony had several secret children, according to the internet, one of them being Spider-Man), he was disseminating his own disinformation in order to see what sort of trouble he could stir up.

Bucky wasn’t sure whether to be relieved, or sick to his stomach when he heard the beeping of the keycard, opening of the door, and the sound of Tony shuffling into the room, looking emotionally wrung out, but happy nonetheless. He sprung to his feet, game of solitaire forgotten.

“Well?”

Tony smiled wistfully, shoving his hands into his pockets. “She’s getting married.”

Relief washed through Bucky, and it made him feel ashamed; he trusted Tony, he really did, and the man deserved better than petty jealousy. “That’s good news, right?”

“Funny you should ask,” Tony said, a strange look in his eyes as he shrugged out of his suit jacket. Bucky watched as Tony loosened his tie, kicked off his shoes, and flopped down onto the couch, making anxious “come here” gestures with his hands. “I said the same thing.”

As soon as Bucky was close enough to grab, Tony did just that, pulling him down onto the couch, almost crushing himself in the process before squirming around in order to do his best octopus impression. Bucky found himself wrapped up in legs and arms, while Tony made contented noises, and tried to wriggle even closer. In this position, it was hard to remember how he had ever been even remotely jealous.

Bucky shifted a bit so he could get a hand free to play with Tony’s hair, then asked, “So, why the hell did we fly to Zürich like the world was ending?”

“I think she was a little freaked out that Happy proposed, and that she’d said yes,” Tony said, lips brushing against Bucky’s jaw as he spoke. “She started crying when I offered to give her away at the wedding, which, you know, freaked me out until I realized they were happy tears.”

“Crisis averted, then?”

“You smell great,” Tony sighed. “And, yeah, I think so. Err, although… no. Maybe?” He shifted, disentangling himself enough that they could actually see each other, his face scrunched up in thought. “The whole thing was… vibey. Definitely lots of vibes shooting around, like she expected me to be upset.”

Bucky tilted his head to the side, a little flutter going through his stomach as he studied Tony’s face. He tried to sound nonchalant, and failed rather miserably when he asked, “Are you?”

Tony looked slightly amused, but then his eyes widened, his mouth falling open as he gasped, and began pushing himself fully upright. “James Buchanan Barnes, are you jealous? Look at your face,
It was impossible to fight off the blush, or the smile, no matter how hard he tried, so Bucky hung his head, and shrugged in defeat. “Ha ha, yes, a little, okay? Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Not sure you’ve noticed, but you’re the young, super hot one in this relationship,” Tony was definitely leering at him now. “The fact that I get to roll around naked with you has already done permanent damage to my ego. It can never be deflated.”

Bucky ducked his head a bit more, not sure why the compliment had caught him so off guard. He’d always thought of himself as handsome enough, maybe even a bit better than some, but that had been before the war, before the Winter Soldier.

“You act like people don’t regularly throw themselves at you,” Bucky countered, sliding a hand over the curve of Tony’s ass, giving it a little squeeze. Tony eyed him a little more intensely, eyelashes fluttering as he studied Bucky’s face. “I’m serious,” he brushed his thumb over Bucky’s lower lip, leaving it tingling. “You, my friend, are painfully attractive. You put up with my insanity, and bullshit, and wear incredibly distracting, tight leather pants to play superhero with me and my friends. It’s so preposterous that I’m still sixty eight percent sure this is an elaborate simulation I’ve somehow trapped myself in.”

“You designed my uniform,” Bucky felt the need to point out. “You only have yourself to blame, pal.”

Tony kissed him, a slow, thorough exploration of his mouth that left Bucky humming with pleasure, and chasing after his mouth (with no luck) when Tony finally pulled away. "So, what're we dealing with here, talk to me."

Bucky chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip, then gave a little shrug. “Pepper is a big part of your life.” Tony’s eyes narrowed, and he opened his mouth to protest, but Bucky poked him, and continued. “And she should be, she’s one of your oldest friends. It’s just… I don’t think we’ve been in a room together for more than ten minutes.”

Tony opened his mouth, then let it fall shut again with a little huff, his brows drawing together. "Huh, you know, I think you're right." He wiggled around, fishing his phone out of his pocket, then began pecking away at it while adding, “Let’s fix that.” He twisted his head around to face Bucky again, fingers never slowing as he added, “Totally not on purpose by the way. Honest.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“Things were, ah, not easy, exactly, for me. After.” He tapped the phone against his chin thoughtfully. “I couldn’t see her without making an ass of myself for a while there, and… yeah, so we just didn’t. For a while. She’s not in New York a lot these days. I dunno, maybe the whole Avengers situation is still tough for her.”

It was quiet for a moment while Tony was woolgathering, Bucky content to remain silent, studying Tony’s profile while he waited. Eventually, Tony seemed to come back to himself, grinning sheepishly.

“Hey, until this whole thing,” he twirled his finger in the air above the two of them, “I thought Pepper was my one shot at the whole,” he exhaled loudly, “you know, happily ever after with another person. Not being able to hack it with her felt like the end of the world.”

“I get that.”
“And then a certain drop dead gorgeous, one-armed bandit came along and stole my heart,” Tony added, tossing his phone onto the coffee table.

“So this is my fault?” Bucky asked, rolling them on the couch so that Tony was pinned underneath him. “Sexy, mad genius, billionaire, superhero takes advantage of a brainwashed, time displaced amputee, then blames him for it?”

This earned him one of Tony’s full body laughs. “Thank you for making ‘sexy’ first on the list, by the way,” he said in the most serious tone he could muster. “Hey, my genius brain just had a thought—I should probably take advantage of you some more.”

Tony kissed him then, one of his “I’m mapping the interior of your mouth for science,” type kisses, the sort that never failed to leave Bucky’s pants feeling tighter, and his breathing a little chaotic.

He loved kissing Tony, could do it for hours, or days, and never get bored. Kissing while touching was even better, though, be it tracing the curve of his jaw, or sliding a hand up the back of his shirt to feel the play of muscles between his shoulder blades. Bucky loved cataloging all the places Tony’s skin was rough, or smooth, scarred, ticklish, muscled, or soft. Loved the reassuring hum and slight reverberation of the arc reactor against his own skin, while tasting Tony again, and again.

Tony made the most amazing little noises the longer you kissed him. Not quite moans, not exactly purring, but something in between, his eyes open (because Bucky never closed his own, not wanting to miss anything) and hooded with pleasure.

There always came a point, though, a tipping point, where Tony held on tighter, kissed a little rougher, as if he was worried Bucky would suddenly change his mind about the whole thing, or someone would burst into the room and separate the two of them.

It drove Bucky crazy, seeing that wild, desperate look in Tony’s eyes, like gasoline on a fire. It was there now, as Tony rolled his hips and rubbed against him, his hair sticking up all crazy, his lips pink, and swollen, and so Bucky had to tear the man’s shirt open, sending buttons scattering across the floor in the process. Tony just smiled wider, tugging his tie off the rest of the way before shoving at Bucky’s shoulders.

“I’m mapping the interior of your mouth for science,” Tony moaned into his mouth, breathing heavily as Bucky kissed him again, and again, each time a little more insistent, hands sliding down to cup Tony’s ass, pull them tightly together so he could rock against him, the friction amazing, but not enough. It was never enough.

Bucky wrapped his arms tightly around Tony, keeping him exactly where he was, and Tony’s frustrated noise changed into one of pleasure about halfway through making it, just as Bucky began sucking at the tender spot just below Tony’s ear.

“Vampire,” he muttered, shoving again, and this time Bucky let him get up.

They watched each other hungrily as they worked themselves out of their respective pants, and underwear,Tony hurling his aside as if they had personally offended him, before grabbing Bucky’s and doing the same. Finally, they were naked.

“You, no moving,” Tony ordered.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he asked, and before he’d even gotten the sentence out there was something being whipped at his head. His reflexes saved him from getting smacked in the face by the lube Tony had thrown across the room, but before he could complain, Tony was back and sinking to his knees in front of the couch, shoving the coffee table out of the way so he had more space.

Bucky spread his legs a bit when Tony pushed at his knees, the hand with the lube still where it’d been when he caught it, the other hovering over the couch as he held his breath, completely enraptured by the sight of Tony wrapping his lips around the head of his cock. He was all flushed in the face, and absolutely gorgeous, and Bucky still had trouble (every single time) believing that this was his life now.

Tony’s mouth was wet, and warm, and clever, and he was always balanced on just the right side of not enough and too much, so Bucky couldn’t do much more than moan, and try to keep himself from coming too soon.

Tony’s blowjobs, without a doubt, absolutely wrecked him. He was so good at it, it was almost worrisome—the first time he’d complimented Tony on his skill, he’d gotten a remark about boarding school being good for something after all, the look on Tony’s face prompting Bucky to leave it at that.

It was more than just the feeling (but goddamn, did that feel good) it was also the way he would look up at Bucky through his eyelashes, like he was the center of the universe or something, his cheeks hollowed, and flushed. And the noises, wet and obscene, as he put on a show for Bucky. Absolutely, it was a show, his eyes flashing as he pulled off in order to stroke and lick and suck, drag his lips over and around the head of Bucky’s cock until he was whimpering, and then take him all the way into the back of his throat in one long, graceful move.

Tony snapped his fingers, and Bucky realized that he’d been holding his hand out, waiting for the lube. “Sorry,” Bucky said, his voice low, and husky. He dropped the tube into Tony’s waiting hand, but had to lean over and kiss him again, moaning at the taste of himself he could already pick up in Tony’s mouth.

“You are so getting it,” Tony mumbled, “right here, right now. Yup. It’s on.”

Bucky laughed softly as Tony gave him a shove so that he was sprawled back against the couch again, tugging on his hips in order to pull him a bit closer, the laughter morphing into a loud, jagged moan; Tony had skipped ahead, working two lubed fingers into his ass, not bothering with any sort of teasing preamble.
“I like this plan,” he said, blissed out, spreading his legs wider, and groaning again as Tony picked up where he’d left off with the blowjob.

This was like a little slice of heaven, Tony’s mouth working around him, while his fingers loosened him up, until he couldn’t quite get enough in either direction, wanting to thrust into the wet heat, while also needing to push himself down on the fingers working inside of him.

By the time a third digit joined the party, Bucky was holding onto the back of the couch for dear life, about two seconds away from coming in Tony’s mouth. Of course, the brat was perfectly aware of this, which is why the bobbing of his head slowed, and then stopped altogether, as he rocked back and stared up at Bucky, eyes narrowed, and hungry looking.

“Hi there,” he said, as if they’d just run into each other while out for coffee or something. It made Bucky shake with laughter, the sound changing to a keening noise at the end as Tony pulled out his fingers.

Bucky licked his lips, biting into the lower one in anticipation as he watched Tony open the bottle of lube again, working it over his cock with long, lazy strokes, never breaking eye contact.

“Hi, yourself,” Bucky managed after a while, and it felt a little like deja vu, but before he could think on it too hard, he was very much distracted, breathing going ragged as Tony slowly—way slower than was necessary in fact—slid his cock into Bucky.

For a moment, they just got their bearings, foreheads together, but then Tony started rocking his hips, and Bucky remembered that he had arms, and hands, and could use them, and so he tried to touch Tony everywhere, pulling him closer, throwing off his rhythm in order to steal more kisses from him.

Sex with Tony was a lot like flying with him, a sort of wild, whooping, exhilarating experience that left you feeling alive, and hyper aware, and begging him to go faster, trusting he wouldn’t drop you, and that if anything were to happen, he’d be right there to catch you, keep you safe.

“How,” Tony asked, his face pressed against Bucky’s shoulder, sucking and licking along the scarred joining of skin with metal, “do they even make white couches?” Bucky blinked, and had to look down at the couch they were on, momentarily confused, but before he could answer, Tony was rambling on. “S’okay, I’ll just, uh, fuck you on every piece of furniture in the room,” he punctuated this with a particularly deep thrust, “then buy the hotel. Do it in every other room, too.”

“We’ll alternate floors,” Bucky suggested.

“I like the way you think.”

This was another thing to love about Tony, because it was impossible to be embarrassed, or shy, or anything even remotely approaching that when they were naked, and tangled together. It was like playing, in the best possible way; he was happy to do everything, and anything.

Bucky had wondered once or twice if it had been like that between him and Pepper, but it was hard to imagine her as anything but put together, and classy. Harder still to picture her with her tongue buried in Tony’s ass, making him whimper and beg to be fucked, but then again, Bucky hated thinking of the man with anyone other than himself.

There was a thin sheen of sweat visibly beading up on Tony’s skin, and Bucky twisted a bit so he could lick some of it off of Tony’s shoulder, licked over his collar bone, and neck, and then let himself fall back against the couch again, taking himself in hand, stroking in time with Tony’s thrusts, the salty taste of him in his mouth.
“How are you even real?” Tony growled, his teeth biting down into his lower lip as he watched Bucky touch himself, captivated by the sight of the shiny metal fingers wrapped around Bucky’s cock.

It didn’t take long—he’d wanted to hold off, make it last a little longer, but he just couldn’t, not with Tony hard and insistent inside of him, fucking him with enough gusto that they’d moved the couch across the floor.

So Bucky gave in to the wave of pleasure, head thrown back, a trembling hand holding onto Tony’s shoulder as he came all over the both of them, his entire body shaking with pleasure, waiting on Tony’s answering cry, feeling him pulled over the edge, crashing into Bucky with a shout, until they were a tangle of limbs, and sweat, and semen.

It was quiet for a moment as they caught their breath, Tony reduced to dead weight on top of him, Bucky’s thighs trembling, as he stared at the ceiling.

“How many rooms in this place?” Buck asked, and Tony started laughing, sounding drunk, or hysterical, the sound smothered a bit by his face being mashed against Bucky’s throat. “I’m not going to see Zürich at all, am I?”

Tony squirmed, and Bucky made a noise of dismay at the feeling of him pulling out, but it was nice to be able to lower his legs again, stretch out, and stare at what an absolutely beautiful wreck Tony was.

“Probably not,” Tony admitted, the arc reactor glowing brightly in the center of his chest as he stood up. “You’re a mess, by the way.”

Bucky looked down at himself—definitely a mess—then at the wet spots on the couch, and shrugged. “Shower?”

“Then room service,” Tony suggested, snapping his fingers.

The water pressure in the shower left a bit to be desired, and it was cramped compared to what was in the Tower, but it still felt amazing. Tony rambled on about how he would redesign the bathrooms once he owned the hotel, while Bucky washed his hair for him, content to listen.

"On second thought, we should go out to eat," Tony said, interrupting himself while in the middle of describing how the handheld showerheads in Japan made him feel like he was getting a little too up close and personal with Doc Ock. "I saw you pack that Ermenegildo Zegna suit."

“The one you ordered me to bring so you could ogle me?” Bucky teased, shoving Tony aside so he could rinse off. “If we’re going out, I’m shaving.”

Bucky climbed out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist before grabbing his shaving kit. He pushed the bathroom door open in order to let some cooler air into the room, then started wiping at one of the mirrors with a towel in an attempt to clear a spot so he could get to work.

Just as he reached for the shaving cream, he heard something. Acting on instinct, he reached for the Glock he’d hidden in the bathroom. Tony tended to forget he was a target, but Bucky never did—before the game of solitaire, he’d also swept the place for surveillance devices, explosives, and then secreted weapons throughout the place, in case he needed them in a pinch.

“Antoshka, zip it,” he ordered in Russian, and Tony stopped his singing, head popping out from behind the shower curtain. “We have company.”
“Where the hell did you get a gun?” Tony hissed, eyes wide at the sight of a half naked Bucky standing in the bathroom with his pistol drawn.

Bucky gestured rapidly at the door, indicating there was at least one person out there, possibly armed, before yanking the extendable makeup mirror off of the wall. He approached the door cautiously, gun held at the ready as he used the mirror to peer into the room. Just as he caught sight of their visitor, they heard, “Tony?”

"Hey, it’s Pepper!” Tony said, sounding relieved.

Bucky sagged, and glared over his shoulder at Tony. “Did your ex seriously just let herself into our hotel room?”

Tony’s expression shifted from relieved to appropriately mortified, and a lot confused. “Um.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Bucky muttered, clicking the safety on the Glock before tucking it between the small of his back and the towel.

He ignored Tony’s little, “Hey, wait,” protest, and walked out into the room to find Pepper stepping over what looked to be Bucky’s pants, her pretty face scrunched up in confusion, and perhaps mild disgust. There were clothes everywhere, and it stank of sex. With each step, her heels clicked loudly against the floor, and the confusion seemingly mounted.

“Can I help you?”

Pepper jumped, almost dropping her phone in the process as one hand went to her mouth, the other to her chest, letting out a little scream of surprise. “Oh my god,” she stammered, and Bucky watched her eyes go wide and her cheeks flush pink as she finally noticed him standing there, watching her, wearing only a towel.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she managed, blinking a few times before looking away in embarrassment. As he watched, she began jabbing at her phone, head shaking. “I am so, so sorry! I’m going to kill Tony, he must have…”

Whatever she’d planned to say was forgotten; Tony’s phone began vibrating its way across the coffee table while simultaneously treating them to Cake’s *Short Skirt/Long Jacket*. For one long, awful, eternal moment, Pepper stared at the phone, her expression growing darker, until she ended the call, and the phone went silent.

Then she looked up, and Bucky realized exactly what was going on. “Hey, genius, get your ass out here,” he barked, maintaining eye contact with Pepper. It was obvious she was about two seconds away from a full on explosion, her mouth a tight line, and her face bright pink.

The shower turned off, and Tony popped out of the bathroom a minute later, wrapped up in a fuzzy bathrobe, hair plastered to his head. He took one look at Pepper, then at Bucky, and blurted in a panicked voice, “What did I do?”

“You,” Pepper started, pointing to him with her phone, “idiot.”

Tony opened and closed his mouth a few times, obviously completely surprised, looking to Bucky for support. “What?”

“Antoshka,” Bucky began, surprised at how calm he sounded. He was about to lose it himself, although (unlike Pepper) he wasn’t mad—he’d finally figured out why she didn’t take their relationship seriously, and it was so ridiculous, that, well. Only Tony. “You never told Pepper?”
Tony looked absolutely confused, especially when he looked back over to Pepper, finding her with her arms folded across her chest, eyes narrowed. “What… Of course I did, why would you say that?”


“But I talk about him with you all the time, Pepper, what the fuck?”

Tony looked legitimately upset, so Bucky took pity on him, and wrapped a hand around the back of his neck, giving him an affectionate squeeze. Tony looked over at him, pleading with his eyes as if worried Bucky thought he had been hiding things from Pepper on purpose, but then looked away as Pepper answered him.

“Yes, you talk about him all the time,” Pepper agreed. “Telling me how much I’m going to love him, and what a great guy he is, and that he’s handsome, and funny, and all my favorite things. So I thought…” She paused, her angry facade cracking for just a moment, so that Bucky could see the smile hiding behind one of her hands before she cleared her throat and continued, “I thought that you were trying to fix us up!”

It was quiet for a moment, but then Tony was sputtering. “Pepper, that is the most insane—why would I want to set you up with my boyfriend? He’s mine!” As if to make this clear, Tony grabbed hold of Bucky’s arm and shook him hard enough that he had to make a grab for the towel before it was knocked loose. “You’re with Happy!”

“Because you never told me he was your boyfriend,” Pepper insisted, throwing her hands in the air. “Tony, you jerk, I’ve been thinking you disapproved of me and Happy, and…”

“What the hell, Pep? I told you, I swear, I’m pretty sure it was the night we made it official, even. James, help me out here,” he spun to face Bucky, “we were at the restaurant, I even said, “Pepper will be proud,” or something, and…”

“Then they brought the food,” Bucky interrupted, “and you forgot about Pepper, because you were too busy stealing my sausage.”

“Okay, first, phrasing,” Tony said, holding up his finger, “second…” he trailed off, eyes shifting around as he thought things through. “Okay. Wait. Wait wait wait…”

“Apparently, we’ve been having two very different conversations,” Pepper said, the anger long gone, affectionate exasperation having taken its place.

“Ah,” Tony said, understanding dawning. “This is why you looked so upset when I told you I’d brought James with me to Zürich.”

“And why I came to answer you in person after getting a text telling me,” she pulled up the message and read out loud, “Pep Pep Pep, this is an amazing opportunity! I’ll keep Happy occupied, and you have dinner with James. You won’t regret it. Promise.”

Tony stood there with his mouth open, a soft groan escaping.

Pepper sighed, shaking her head and looking at Bucky. “I am so sorry, this is why I’ve been avoiding you, and New York,” she said. “I would love to have dinner with you.”

“I think I’d like to get dressed first,” Bucky said, giving her a smile that had Tony making a little noise of protest, “if that’s alright by you?”
Pepper looked him over again and shook her head, “I suppose, if you must.”

“Okay, see,” Tony began, but Pepper cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“You and Happy can come, too. I’m going to go tell him the news.”

Tony scampered after her, walking her to the door, all while sputtering a string of apologies. Bucky shook his head, and was about to head back into the bathroom when he heard, “Oh, hey, before I forget, I want to buy the hotel.”

“Tony,” he heard, said in the way that only people who really, truly loved him could say his name, “you already own the hotel.”
Despite his shitty track record, there were some relationships Tony Stark figured he could count on no matter what, the one he had with gravity being somewhere near the top of the list.

“Serves you right,” he mutters to himself, worrying at his lower lip with his teeth, eyes wide as he drinks in the details of the alien ships. He’d like to think someday he’ll learn his lesson, stop counting on things in general, but considering he’s about to die alone in space, it’s sort of a moot point.

He’s pretty good at imagining things, but can’t quite get his mind to wrap itself around the idea of this being the way it ends. It’s grasping desperately at snatches of pop culture nonsense while the panic slowly creeps in around the edges. Snippets of 2001: A Space Odyssey, the awfulness that was Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Want To Miss A Thing,” because that’s easier than thinking of Pepper.

He’s never going to see her again, and at the moment he sort of, kind of hates her a little for not having answered the phone. Hates that he’s feeling that way. His last thoughts of her should be loving ones, happy reflections on their time together, but none of that flashes before his eyes, not a bit of it.

In fact, the only thing flashing before his eyes is the warhead rather dramatically finding its way to the intended target.

Falling isn’t quite falling when gravity fails you. He can’t really tell that he’s moving, what with the pain creeping in as the arc reactor takes a cue from gravity, and gives up on him too. He thinks he’s drifting back to Earth, though he’s not sure what good it’ll do him considering the suit is dead and he’s about ten seconds away from blacking out.

It’s probably a sign of how fucked up Tony is that his last conscious thought isn’t of not having been able to say goodbye to Pepper, but is of Captain America. He sees the (beautiful) stupid face of his childhood hero, the man who had graced the posters in his bedroom, only his eyes are filled with (all too familiar) disappointment, disapproval, disgust.

“You better stop pretending to be a hero.”

“How’s that for pretending?” Tony asks no one at all.

And then he closes his eyes.
Blackness.

“How did you get out of the wormhole?”

Tony opens his mouth to answer, even as the room shrinks and grows around him, as sound fluctuates, and his heart, and his head, and everything goes haywire. He needs to get to the suit, get into the suit, because…

“Because you know you didn’t.”

There is a little boy that still lives on somewhere inside of Tony’s brain, in his heart, one that thrills just at hearing his father’s voice again, even if the words turn his blood to ice, and leave him shaking.

“I can’t believe you,” Howard says, and Tony squeezes his eyes shut even tighter than before. “Oh for the love of… Open your eyes, boy!”

So, of course he does.

And this isn’t right, it isn’t fair, and…

“Hi, dad.”

Howard Stark, as always, looks larger than life, and Tony finds he’s not lost in the vastness of space anymore, he’s not having a panic attack over some kid asking him a question he can’t answer. He isn’t in the suit, or his bed—he’s back in his father’s study.

The smell is what gets him, the smell of the books, and the leather of the chair he’s sitting in, Howard’s cologne, and most of all the (awful, familiar, wonderful, missed) aroma of the drink his father pours him after topping off his own.

It’s the sounds, too, the ice rattling around in the glass, his own ragged, erratic breathing, Howard’s (familiar) sigh of resigned disappointment.

“So you have any idea how embarrassing it’s been for me, watching you?”

Tony flinches, his fingers tightening around the glass. Usually, when his dad is in this kind of mood, it’s best to stay quiet.

“So, hey, well, your golden boy is back, so go haunt Steve Rogers if you’re looking for the warm and fuzzies.”
Howard laughs at this, almost a snorting giggle. It’s obvious he’s been drinking for awhile. The sound makes Tony’s skin crawl, all the little hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. It’s a special sort of laugh, the, “I know something you don’t know,” laugh.

“What part of this do you not comprehend?” Howard asked, the ice rattling loudly as he knocked back the single-malt bourbon. “You’re dead, idiot, you never made it out of the wormhole.”

And just like that, Tony feels the foundations shake, feels everything give out from under him, because really, hasn’t he always (nestled deep, something black and insidious and unshakeable) had a sneaking suspicion that this was the case?

“Oh.”

Really, though it makes sense. It makes more sense than him living in a superhero frat house in New York. Makes more sense than James loving him, which has always felt too good to be true. While he’s at it, Captain America claiming him as one of his best friends has always sounded like the punchline to a joke he can’t quite remember the rest of.

He can’t feel his limbs, isn’t really aware of moving until the bourbon is sloshing past his lips, is burning its way down his throat, leaving his eyes watering. They’re not tears, they can’t be. After all, what’s the point of crying when you’re already dead?

“Finally sinking in, is it?”

It’s the “keep up, boy” tone of voice, and yeah, part of him has missed this, too, because he’s pathetic like that.

“So, what, this is the afterlife or something?” Tony uses his drink to gesture around the room, trying for flippant, but falling far short. “No offense, but a tearful father-son reunion feels a bit cliche, not to mention out of character.”

Howard just glares at him over the rim of his glass, and Tony fidgets, feeling all of about seven years old. Maybe if he’s really lucky his father will send him off to boarding school all over again.

“If you think I’m happy to see you, think again.”

Tony laughs at this, his jaw working, muscle in his cheek twitching. “Right, so, not much has changed, then.”

“It’s that attitude of yours that landed you in this mess in the first place,” Howard snaps, hand slamming down against the top of his desk. Everything in the room jumps, Tony included, and he takes another drink if only to have something to do with his hand, and his mouth. “Am I supposed to be happy you went and got yourself killed?”

That actually gets him, a strange hopeful fluttering sensation in his stomach as his eyes go wide and his mouth opens to reply, but before he can say anything, his father adds, “All those women, and not a single heir to the Stark name. Who carries on my work now, Tony?”

And just like that, he’s laughing, because of course. Of fucking course.

“Guess your greatest creation was a bust.”

He’s laughing, but he wants to cry. It’s surreal, it’s like they’ve had this conversation before, and part of him is thinking about when he was thirteen, while simultaneously trying desperately not to, but mostly he wishes he could stand up, just walk out of the room, run, just get away.
He can’t, though, he can’t seem to move anything except the arm with the glass, can’t seem to do more than lift it back to his lips, tip out the contents until the ice cubes knock against his teeth.

Howard is right there, right in front of him, and the glass is filled and drained, filled and drained, until it feels like an eternity has passed, and eternity comprised of Tony squirming under his father’s disapproving gaze, the burning taste of alcohol on his tongue.

It feels more real to him than anything has since he woke up to find he’d been hooked up to a car battery in a cave in Afghanistan.

“I gave you everything,” Howard is saying, and Tony feels like he’s drowning, can only stare at his hand where its wrapped around the glass while he tries not to throw up. “Every opportunity. I trusted you with the future, and what did you do? You squandered it.”

The problem is, Tony can’t bring himself to argue. “Yes, sir.”

Howard is talking—berating him really—but this has become a distant sort of familiar angry buzzing sound, an undercurrent being drowned out by the cacophony of his heart pounding in his ears, by the pain in his chest as his lungs struggle, because he can’t seem to catch his breath, and he wants to scream, or cry, but mostly he wants James.

As if reading his mind, Howard grabs Tony’s face, forcing his head up so he’ll make eye contact, and Tony already knows what’s coming, so it’s no surprise when Howard says, “Don’t think it’s escaped my notice that the little afterlife fantasy you’ve constructed for yourself centers around you regularly servicing the man responsible for my death. For your mother’s death, Tony!”

“You don’t get to talk about him,” and Tony is proud of the determination he hears in his voice, even if he does sound more than a little shattered.

“About your imaginary, vulgar relationship?”

Howard sneers at him, and Tony wishes it wasn’t so familiar, wishes he wasn’t happy just to have his father’s attention. Sure, it’d be nice to see approval in his eyes instead of disappointment, but things have never really worked that way between the two of them. Not much point in changing it up now.

He blinks, and then they’re not in the study anymore, they’re in his home, the one in Malibu, only its still in one piece. The panic has returned in full force now, because he’s back on the couch, paralyzed, betrayed by his own body, and he doesn’t want to be here, doesn’t want to live this again.

Only, it’s even worse, because this time it isn’t Obadiah standing above him, it’s his father. The look in his eyes is the same as Stane’s had been. The same as Captain America’s. It’s always the same…

“What kind of world would it be today if I was as selfish as you?” Howard asks, and Tony can only gasp as the arc reactor is ripped out of his chest. “The only thing you care about is yourself.”

Tony can feel the tears on his face, but can’t do anything about them, can only wonder why people keep saying things like this to him. He’s pretty sure it’s rather painfully obvious that he’s the person he cares about the least. Always has been.

It feels like gravity is failing him all over again, darkness creeping back in at the edges, until all he
can see is his father’s eyes. He thinks of James again, summons a mental image of his smile, tries to hold onto it.

“I should have known,” and Howard’s voice sounds far away now, “once a sissy, always a sissy. Go back to your little fantasy, then, boy. I’m done wasting my time on you.”

Blackness.

“Sir? Sir, are you alright?”

“Shut up.” Tony snapped, blinking through the tears, trying to get his breathing back under control. He didn’t remember getting out of the bed, but must have done so, because he was at the bar, one hand pressed against the arc reactor, the other wrapped around an unopened bottle of scotch.

“Shall I call Master Barnes for you?”

Tony let go of the reactor long enough to get the top off of the bottle, then took a sip as his hand settled back against his chest, the metal comfortingly solid beneath his hands. The burn of the scotch was wonderful, and horrible, and left him clenching his jaw.

“You seem to be experiencing…”

“I said shut up!” Tony shouted, his grip tightening around the neck of the bottle. “Shut up, shut the fuck up. I swear, JARVIS, if I hear one more word from you I’ll lose it, okay?”

He could feel the silence though, feel JARVIS watching him in a way that he’d normally classify as comforting. Right then it felt oppressive, and judgemental, and his skin was crawling, so why not have a drink, try to push it all away?

Two broken glasses later, he gave up on pouring anything out. It wasn’t the first time he’d found himself drinking straight from a bottle because of how badly his hands were shaking. Probably wouldn’t be the last, either.

Tony felt trapped inside a feedback loop, thoughts racing, circling around and around on each other, returning again and again to his father’s eyes, to his words, to the wormhole, and the neverending glass of bourbon, and all of the ways he’d failed to live up to his name.

He continued to work his way through the bottle until everything began to feel too much like his dream (was it a dream?), and he felt compelled to throw it across the room, watch as it smashed against the windows, the booze momentarily obscuring his view of the outside world, and wasn’t that just poetic?

Tony swallowed a sob, and abandoned his suite, not really sure what he was doing or where he was going until he found himself standing outside of Bruce’s door, banging away like a maniac.
Bruce looked understandably concerned when he opened the door, but not necessarily surprised, and Tony wondered if JARVIS had given him a heads up once he realized where Tony was headed.

“Question,” Tony pushed his way into the room, ignoring Bruce’s little sound of protest, “how do I know what I’m experiencing is reality?”

He spun on his heels just in time to watch as Bruce closed the door and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’ve been drinking.”

“Ouch, okay, not the answer I expected.” The scotch was hitting his system hard now, finally catching up with him, and despite feeling gutted, a giggle escaped. “Might be a valid qualifier, though, gotta give you points for that, Brucie Bear.”

Bruce was good at staying calm, but Tony could see right through it, could see the careful control in his movements as he headed for his kitchen, keeping his voice casual as he said, “I think I’m going to need tea for whatever this is.”

“Probably, yeah.”

Tony followed him, his hand constantly returning to the arc reactor despite his best attempts to keep it at his side. Even though he promised himself he’d wait until he had a warm cup of something in his hands before he started up, he couldn’t. The words felt pressurized inside of him.

“So, right, reality, kind of questioning mine right now. I either had a top notch dream, or an epiphany, and gotta say, I’m sort of on the fence with this one. Course, that might be the scotch talking. Or the crippling fear and self loathing. Whatever, one of those.”

It was strange how Bruce’s sighs never set Tony on edge, never left him feeling the way most people’s sighs did. For a moment, he forgot why he was there, distracted by the way Bruce was almost curled in on himself, and the tightness around his eyes.

Slowly, his brain put two and two together, and it left him feeling like (even more of) a colossal asshole. He wasn’t the only one in the Tower with daddy issues. In fact, considering how his own childhood had gone, Bruce was probably the last person who should be subjected to a poor little rich boy Tony Stark pity party. Not getting hugs growing up would have seemed like paradise compared to Bruce’s encounters with his own alcoholic father.

“Fuck. Hey, I’m sorry, I should go,” he caught himself as he reached out to touch Bruce’s arm, yanked his hand back before he could make contact.

“Tony,” and Bruce didn’t pull away, just grabbed him by the wrist and held on, keeping him right where he was.

They stood like that, watching the flame under the kettle, Bruce’s fingers tight around Tony’s wrist, until he was crying, couldn’t help it, breath hitching in his chest as a little sob escaped.

“Seriously, I’m a fuck up,” he said, “you shouldn’t have to deal with this.”

Bruce took a deep breath, faced him, and had the audacity to smile. “I’ve seen you drunk before, Tony.”

“That’s just proof that I’m an awful friend,” Tony pointed out.

“Pretty sure I’m the only one who gets to decide if you’re an awful friend, which you’re not.” Bruce studied him for a moment before asking, “Your father has something to do with this, doesn’t he?”
Tony swallowed, nodded, shrugged a shoulder. “Hey, did I ever tell you about how happy he wasn’t when he found out my number one pastime at boarding school was sucking dick?”

Bruce sighed again, a sad, sympathetic little noise, his fingers tightening around Tony’s wrist. “Was that what you dreamt about?”

“Not really. Sort of.” Between the tears and the booze, the room had taken on a sort of soft, hazy aspect. “It was related, I guess. Back then I got this big speech about what it meant to be a Stark, about responsibility, and how ashamed of me he was.”

“Tony.”

“So, there’s me at thirteen having sex with this prostitute,” Tony rambled on, just wanting to get through the confession, because he felt like Bruce needed the context. “High class, mind you, maybe ten years older than me, all curves, and all on dear old dad’s dime. Guess I should just be happy he didn’t insist on actually being in the room when it happened.”

It wasn’t like it had been awful, exactly. She’d been nice, really, had talked to him, tried to make him comfortable. They’d passed a joint back and forth until they were both a little giggly and relaxed, and by the time she was helping him out of his clothes, it had almost felt normal.

He’d been dumped off at boarding school when everything was said and done, and they’d never talked about it again, mostly because Tony made sure only one half of his sexual exploits found their way back to his father through the rumor mill.

“In case you’re looking for some sort of, ah, relevance in all that—surprise—it circles back to having let the old man down yet again. The Stark legacy dies when I do, and that could be as soon as tomorrow, if I’m not dead already, which is still up for debate, by the way,” Tony rambled.

“Ah, so we’re talking afterlife, as opposed to being trapped within a man-made virtual reality.” Bruce nodded to himself, removing the kettle from the flame just as it approached boiling. “When is it you think you died?”

“Have I told you lately that I love you?” Tony asked, entirely serious. “The curiosity, really digging on it right now, just what I needed. It’s the wormhole, never made it back out. Shit was already crazy before that, but in a believable sort of way, you know?”

Bruce nodded, “Right, because building your very own suit of flying armor out of scraps in a cave is the height of believability.”

“Hey, those were Stark Industries scraps, thank you very much.”

“Tony, come on, are you seriously telling me you’re questioning whether or not you’re alive?”

Tony tugged, pulling out of the hold Bruce had on him in order to fold his arms across his chest. “I take it back, I don’t love you at all.”

The room tilted a little, and he squeezed his eyes shut, running a hand over his face as if it could push away his thoughts. Stupidly, he wanted to call James, had the feeling just hearing his voice would help all of this make sense, but the last thing he wanted to do was call James, because then he’d know...

“Here, take this,” and Bruce pushed a mug of tea across the counter.

It felt like an apology, and since he wasn’t really in a position to be a dick—he had forced his way
into Bruce’s place at some ungodly hour, after all—Tony accepted, snatched up the mug and allowed Bruce to guide him back into the living room.

“Okay, so walk me through this,” Bruce was using the tone of voice he did whenever they hit a wall while working, and it instantly put Tony at ease. Bruce was taking him seriously, was going to help him.

“Simple, really,” Tony explained, focusing on the discomfort in his hands, but refusing to set down the too hot mug of tea. “Dad and I just did some catching up. Apparently I’ve managed to be disappointing even after dying, which, c’mom, isn’t that an achievement in and of itself?”

Bruce watched him intently, eventually chiming in once he realized Tony was done talking. “The disappointment being that you don’t have an heir?”

“Well, I squandered his gifts, for a start. Too busy worrying about myself. Drinking, partying, and whoring instead of changing the world for the better. Plus, I’m fucking the man who killed my parents. Although, I guess that’s a postmortem disappointment? Not having made another human to carry on the Stark legacy counts across the board, though,” he blew on his tea, took a sip, but it just burned his tongue and he had to spit it back into the mug.

Bruce made a little face over this maneuver, his head tilting to the side, and it was just so Bruce that Tony felt himself relaxing even further. “So if you’re dead, then what does that make me? Did I also die?”

“No, you’re just me, I guess, a part of my subconscious. Or, hey, maybe an extrapolation of some sort.”

“Wait, is the idea here that something has constructed a heaven, for lack of a better term, tailored specifically to what would make you happy?” Bruce was making that face, the “you’re reaching” face.

“Well, yeah, ish.” Tony forced himself to drink the tea, was happy to have the distraction of pain as he struggled to swallow it. “Dad definitely made it sound like it was my choice, somehow, like it had been built to my spec once I died.”

This earned him the Curious Bruce face, his eyebrows raising as he nodded, and leaned back in his seat. “So, if that’s the case, why aren’t you with Steve?”

Tony’s hands began to shake again, and he had no choice but to put down the mug, sloshing some of the hot liquid onto his fingers in the process. “What are you…”

“All the time you went into the wormhole, you already had a whole mess of feelings about Steve,” Bruce pointed out, and he was right, of course, it was just that…

“Touche.”

“And what does it matter, anyway?” Bruce continued on, tilting his head a bit.

“What does it…? Seriously? You’re telling me life and death doesn’t matter?”
Bruce shook his head, smiling patiently. “I am being serious. Let’s say you’re actually dead, and everything you’ve experienced since the wormhole has been part of some elaborate fabrication.”

Tony waited, but Bruce apparently wanted him to pick up the idea and roll with it. He tried to swallow back his anger, but his jaw was still clenched, the room spinning dangerously around him, and it was hard to focus.

Mostly, he was remembering he’d forgotten to eat, and that he’d promised James he would. He was bad at promises, bad at everything.

Bruce made a, “Well?” gesture with his hands.

“Then it’s all bullshit!” Tony finally shouted, throwing his arms up in the air. “None of it is real.”

It’d mean James wasn’t real, and even probing around the edges of that idea left him wanting to curl up in a ball.

“Sure, you could think of it that way, but to what purpose? According to you, you’re already dead, and living in a reality designed specifically to make you happy, for reasons I still don’t understand. But if that’s the case, what does it matter if it’s been constructed? There’s no exit, nothing to return to. Sounds like your only logical choice in that particular scenario is to just go with it. Enjoy yourself.”

Tony gaped at him, a strangled little noise of frustration escaping, but Bruce just shrugged and gave him a “tough luck” sort of smile.

“Or,” he continued, “we stick with Occam’s razor, which would lead me to posit that you’re alive, but happen to be having a really shitty night.”

“Huh.”

That did sound a bit more reasonable. Tony scrubbed a hand over his face again, trying to push aside the fogginess, but it was hard. He was tired, and emotionally exhausted, and drunk, ashamed, guilty, and…

“Either way, you have to ask yourself; what it is you want out of your life, Tony?”

“James,” he answered, because it was the truth. None of the rest of it mattered, really, just James Buchanan Barnes, every last little bit of him, especially the way he made Tony feel.

“So let’s call James,” Bruce suggested, and Tony wanted to cry all over again.

“Nope, no can do, he’s on a mission, could be dangerous.”

“Tony…”

“I can’t, not like this.” He groaned, and tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. “I’m drunk, I’m an alcoholic piece of shit. I wasn’t going to do this anymore, but I fucked up, Bruce, I’m always fucking everything up.”

He didn’t even hear Bruce get up, so it was a bit of a shock to find himself being pulled into a hug.

“Hey, you just had a bad day. Happens to all of us. You didn’t even destroy part of a city like some of us tend to do on our bad days. It’ll be okay, Tony, you’ll see.”

Bruce was good at the hugging thing, and Tony opened his mouth to tell him so, but instead he heard
himself asking, “What if he dies? I... fuck, I tried to call Pepper, did you know that? Before, well, during, really, but she didn’t even answer the phone, Bruce!”

“I know,” which he thought was a stupid thing for Bruce to say, until Tony remembered that phone call had come up during the last time he’d been drunk, and crying all over his friend. Bruce had been forced to take the brunt of the fallout when Pepper had left him.

“What if he needs me, and I can’t get to him in time? What if I have to watch it happen, and can’t do anything to stop it, and... and don’t get to say goodbye to him? I can’t...”

“Shh,” and because it was Bruce rocking him, and rubbing circles against his back, Tony quieted, biting into his lower lip as hard as possible in order to keep from saying anything else. He’d have to crawl right back into the bottle if he continued along that particular train of thought, and trains were also bad to think of, considering James’s history with them.

“Don’t worry, he’s practically indestructible,” Bruce said softly, “you’ll definitely die before he does.”

“Wow, what’s more fucked up; you saying that to make me feel better, or me actually being comforted by it?”

“Let’s call it a tie.”

Tony sniffled. “Sorry. I’m pretty sure I got snot on your shirt.”

“I have other shirts.”

Bruce let go, but not all the way. He kept an arm around Tony’s shoulders, and they sat slumped together on the couch, while Tony tried to match his breathing to Bruce’s slow and steady pace.

“I don’t want a kid.”

“So don’t have a kid.”

Tony nodded to himself. “Dad was right about the legacy, though. It’d be nice to know things will keep on after I’m gone. There’s JARVIS, but... I was thinking of Parker, you know? Maybe he could be my protégé. I know, that sounds weird, and a little dirty, but I mean it in a totally non pervy way.”

Bruce chuckled, gave his shoulders a squeeze. “Not a bad idea.”

“I need to change my will.” Tony yawned rather spectacularly. “Don’t be mad if you get more than you bargained for.”

“That should be the title of my autobiography,” Bruce pointed out, and Tony laughed at that, high and startled, and a little hysterical. And because Bruce was smart, and knew him too well, he added, “He’s not going to judge you for this, or leave you, Tony. He loves you.”

“Yeah, but if I have to see that look in his eyes, it’ll kill me. He could even stay, after, but I’d never forget seeing it there.” Tony swallowed past the lump in his throat. “My father, Obie, Cap. Even Pepper and Rhodey, once or twice. It’s not the disappointment so much as the disgust, Bruce.”

“James won’t ever look at you like that,” and Bruce sounded so sure. Tony wished he could be sure. “Promise me you’ll talk to him?”
“Yeah, soon,” Tony answered softly. His eyes were heavy, as were his limbs, and he was just so 
*exhausted.* “I will, I promise. Promise me you’ll help him, when I do die?”

Bruce squeezed him again, and when he answered, he sounded sad, confusingly sad. “I promise. 
We’ll help each other. All of us will, Tony, because we’re family. That’s what we *all* are to each 
other now, and you’re a part of that, too. A big part.”

Tony heard him, but the words didn’t quite sink in; it was a bit too hard to accept.

“Come on, lie down.”

As he let himself be repositioned on Bruce’s couch, Tony wondered how many times in his life 
someone had put him to bed drunk. Sadly, he was pretty sure that the times he’d simply passed out 
somewhere with no one giving two shits about whether or not he woke up again was a much, much 
higher number.

“Here, drink this,” Bruce ordered, and Tony obliged, emptying the glass of water before flopping 
back down on the couch. He closed his eyes as Bruce added, “Wake me up if you need me.”

A blanket was draped over him, and a hand gently stroked the top of his head, but then it was quiet, 
and he was alone with his muddy thoughts, sleep slowly dragging him under.

“Hey, JARVIS,” he whispered, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you, not like that.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” JARVIS answered. “Sleep now, sir. I’ll watch over you.”

Tony struggled to get the words out before he drifted off into the blackness. He felt they were 
important to say. Important to hear.

"Daddy loves you, J," he said, and then closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

This one came from an actual dream I had of Tony having a nightmare, because my 
brain loves me. Not sure if I quite captured it, but we can only do our best. Tony needs 
some hugs... I think the next one needs to be him and James snuggling, or something, 
because my feels hurt a bit.
Chapter Summary

"Meals were important in the Tower (not just because of supersoldier appetites, either), so much so that Bucky often felt like they were all making up for something they’d never had growing up. Well, maybe not Thor, it sounded like shared meals were a big part of life for him, and so he was making up for something he loved and missed."

Post Pepper, Bucky finally feels like he is an Avenger, and wants to contribute to the household in some way. As a result, he finds himself cooking with each of the Avengers, learning more about them and himself in the process. Meanwhile, Tony has been spending more and more time working on a secret project, and his friends grow concerned. Why, exactly, has he been acting so strange lately?

Chapter Notes

Silvermuse requested a story involving cooking... and I lost my mind, and went way, way off the deep end. What was going to be a quick, cute, Tony & Bucky in the kitchen situation morphed into a multi-chapter monstrosity!

I know I mentioned this on tumblr, but I can't remember if anything wound up in my author notes anywhere, so forgive me if I'm repeating myself. Not too long ago I had a dream where Tony woke up in the middle of the night from a nightmare shitshow involving the wormhole and Howard Stark and his relationship with Bucky. That installment is forthcoming, so we will get all the gory details of that dream and Tony's freakout. This story shows some of the aftermath of him having had said dream.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The Tower was its own remarkable ecosystem, and Bucky had been a part of it long enough to pick up on a few things here and there. Everyone had their own schedules, comings and goings, times when they disappeared, times when you couldn't seem to shake them, training and missions and meals together, and on and on.

Now that he was actually beginning to join them in the field (*and that should have been more terrifying, less exciting*) Bucky felt like he needed to work on really establishing himself as a contributing member of the household, and not just a strange, disconnected ghost haunting the place.

Meals were important in the Tower (*not just because of supersoldier appetites, either*), so much so that Bucky often felt like they were all making up for something they'd never had growing up. Well, maybe not Thor, it sounded like shared meals were a big part of life for him, and so he was making up for something he loved and missed.

Each of the Avengers, with the exception of Tony, cooked for the others. JARVIS maintained a complex schedule based upon availability, frequency, cooking styles, recent battles, current or upcoming anniversaries (*good and bad*), injuries, overall mood, and at that point of him listing the criteria for determining who's turn it was, Bucky had cut JARVIS off.

If he'd already been comfortable in a kitchen, Bucky would have just had JARVIS work him into rotation, but since the most complicated thing he made involved spreading peanut butter and jelly onto bread, he needed a different plan of attack.

"What do you think, J?"

"It would be my pleasure to teach you how to cook, sir. We could begin whenever you like."

"Great, how 'bout dinner for Tony."

"You'll find sir's palate not particularly discriminating," JARVIS explained. "As I'm sure you're aware, as a result of the hours he keeps, we count ourselves victorious if able to influence him to eat at all."

Bucky smiled at this statement. Typically, *he* was the one intervening on behalf of practicalities like food and sleep (*and sometimes sex*) during Tony's little marathon work sessions, as JARVIS was well aware. "I had noticed, yeah. So, what're we making?"

"Will you be procuring ingredients, or shall I have some delivered?"

Although he was well aware JARVIS didn't originate in the ceilings or walls of the Tower, it was hard to break the habit of looking up when speaking to him. Steve and Clint did the same thing, so he didn't feel like the odd man out in that regard.

And so there he was, staring at the ceiling for several reasons. For a start, it hadn't occurred to him that whatever he could possibly need for cooking lessons wouldn't already be on hand. That just seemed to be the way things worked in the Tower, after all.

Secondly, there was something almost suspicious about the tone of JARVIS's voice, as if
he knew this question would give Bucky pause, and had asked for that very reason. Sure, he could have groceries delivered, but he lived with a bunch of nosy superheroes (Clint especially), and since he wasn't entirely confident in his ability to pull off something as simple as cooking dinner for Tony, he really didn't want to open himself up to scrutiny at the moment.

"What can I make using just the ingredients in Tony's kitchen?" he asked.

"There are a variety of options, sir," JARVIS intoned, and then he did the least helpful thing possible; he began listing them all, a steady stream of suggestions and variations on a theme that had Bucky hanging his head, hands braced against the counter.

Around three minutes in, he cut the A.I. off. "Really appreciate the thoroughness, but is there any way we can narrow down the options?"

"Certainly. I shall limit the options to foods sir has specifically expressed a desire to eat in the past, which are also capable of being prepared with the supplies at hand."

Bucky ran a hand over his face as JARVIS began listing things again, and this time there was no two ways about it. The A.I. was going out of his way to make things more difficult. He just didn't know why.

"Okay, stop, stop," he interrupted. "You've got my head spinning."

There was a weighty pause, and then, sounding as innocent as you please, JARVIS said, "Perhaps I am not best suited to guide you through your culinary experiment. I do lack the requisite physicality to experience the act of eating."

And there it was. Sure, JARVIS had a good argument, but he'd never used lack of experience (or a body) as an excuse in the past when helping Bucky. Clearly, he had an ulterior motive, and so Bucky bit off a sigh, and forced as much enthusiasm into his voice as he could muster.

"Do you have a better idea, J?"

"After careful consideration, I am confident I have just the thing, sir."

Which was how Bucky found himself receiving cooking lessons from the Avengers.
“Something’s different.”

Coming as it did after a request to chop the onions, the statement caught Bucky off guard. He paused, knife poised above the cutting board, and looked around the room, suddenly on full alert. With the tiniest flick of the wrist, his grip on the knife shifted into a position best suited for equal parts offense and defense.

Steve’s eyes widened, eyebrows creeping towards his hairline as both hands came up. “Sorry,” and Bucky’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as Steve’s cheeks colored, a sheepish smile working across his face. “Everything’s fine, honest, I just meant… Well, you seem different, is all.”

Bucky let the readiness leave his body, shoulders slumping as he cocked his head at Steve, saying, “Thanks for the heart attack, punk.” There was nothing but warm amusement in his voice as he knocked his shoulder against Steve’s, giving his head a little shake before refocusing on the onions. “Made me think HYDRA was joining us for dinner.”

Steve’s smile was the sort that transformed his face, that made the people who saw it want to smile right back. For a while, the sight of it felt like a weight being slung across his shoulders, but these days when he found himself on the receiving end of that smile, it made Bucky’s heart constrict almost painfully with gratitude. Confronted with it, he couldn’t help himself, had to just reach out and muss up Steve’s hair, give him a playful punch, something, anything to reaffirm that he was real, was there.

“If Tony has to rebuild another kitchen, we’ll never hear the end of it.”

Bucky grinned. “Considering how cagey JARVIS was on the details last time ‘round, I’m willing to put money on it being Tony’s fault. Good luck getting him to fess up, though. Right, what’s next?”

“Oh, uh, they go in the dutch oven there, along with the olive oil,” Steve explained, gathering up some garlic.

Bucky did as he was instructed, and once the onions were in position, he began peeling and chopping garlic. He could feel Steve watching him, and the smile crept back onto his face. “Alright, out with it.”

“What?”

“Not buying the innocent act, pal.”

There was that color in Steve’s cheeks again, and it was odd to find himself actually comfortable with the scrutiny. Steve was right, of course, things were different. It wasn’t that long ago that the idea of making dinner alongside Steve would have left him anxious, and unsure of himself. Now, though…

Well, he no longer started his day parroting his name to JARVIS, and staring at himself in the mirror, desperate to recognize the face he saw, for a start. More often than not, it wasn’t even his bed he woke up in, and any staring that took place involved the sprawl of limbs that was a sleeping Tony Stark. Bucky still couldn’t figure out how someone that size managed to take up so much space, especially considering how large the damn bed was.
That wasn’t the only change, though he figured it was a big part of why the shift in how he felt about himself had taken place at all. As a result, lately Steve’s friendship felt like something he was starving for, which was odd, because it’d never gone away, not for a second. He’d just been incompatible with it for a while.

“It’s hard to put into words.”

Steve focused on washing the tomatoes, and Bucky waited, not wanting to rush him, some of his good mood teetering, concern beginning to creep in around the edges. He wasn’t always the best judge of himself, of his behavior—had he actually been erratic, inappropriate? Was the unfamiliar optimism he had as of late actually a sign of something going wrong?

Knowing him as he did, one look at Bucky’s face had Steve placing a hand on his shoulder, giving him a comforting squeeze. “No, it’s nothing bad, Buck, it’s just…” his bright, honest eyes searched for something in Bucky’s own, and must have found what he was looking for, because he was smiling again. “You seem more at peace. Happy, even.”

Bucky blinked, felt his mouth open a little in surprise. “Oh,” was all he managed.

It was quiet for the space of a few breaths, but then, for reasons he wouldn’t quite be able to explain if anyone had asked, a snort of laughter escaped, which prompted Steve to snicker, and then that was it, they cracked up, Bucky laughing hard enough that he needed to put the knife down for safety reasons.

“*Oh,*” Steve repeated. “I wish you could have seen the look on your face,” and Bucky wheezed with laughter.

“*Your* face,” he insisted, but the words came out almost in a squeak. “Remember… that farm—was it Czechoslovakia?—when, oh man, Dum Dum made breakfast for us?”

Steve’s eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning, smiling wide enough that Bucky could count his teeth. “It was, yeah, and Jim says, ‘I think these are the best eggs I’ve ever had,’ and Dum Dum...”

Steve lost it again, Bucky right there with him, the two of them hunched over, arms around each other’s shoulders. Their eyes met, and at the same time they said, “Those ain’t eggs!”

Bucky couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed that hard, it had to have been sometime during the war, maybe it was even in that farmhouse in Czechoslovakia (*they don’t even call it that anymore*) with the Howling Commandos, as they threw down their utensils and between bouts of laughing so hard Bucky thought he’d crack a rib, desperately tried to get Dum Dum to tell them what the hell it was they were eating. They never did find out.

And here he was, stranded a lifetime away in a world that was only just enough like his own to make him feel like an interloper half of the time, his memories still more Swiss Cheese than not, hands wet with blood, heart full of guilt, an arm short and… none of it mattered right then. Because *Steve* was there, no matter what had happened, he still had Steve, and he was so grateful for that.

“Oh, wow,” Steve gasped, wiping the tears off of his face.

He was still giggling when Bucky grabbed hold of him, pulled him into a tight embrace.
His face and sides still ached from laughing, but there were notes of melancholy in his voice when he said, “You got any idea how much I love you?”

Steve was hugging him back, fierce in his embrace, like HYDRA might actually join them for dinner after all, and try to take his friend away. These tears felt different, felt like ones he’d been holding back for days, or weeks, or years, made his chest ache, and so he squeezed harder, tucking his face against Steve’s neck, just breathing him in.

“Yeah, I know,” Steve said, rocking him a little. “End of the line, remember?”

And he did, Bucky did remember, the first time he’d said that, and the last time he’d heard it.

“End of the line,” he repeated, sighing. He pulled back so he could grab hold of Steve’s face, tug him down enough to plant a kiss on his forehead. “Still think you’re too tall for your own good, though.”

Steve laughed again, his smile a bit wobbly around the edges, and kissed Bucky back, warm lips against his temple. “You just miss being taller is all.”

“Why do you think I like Tony so much?” he deadpanned. “I’m gonna measure him in his sleep one of these nights, cause I’m not buying the 5’9” claim.”

Steve was still smiling, his eyes warm and bright with tears (mostly happy for a change), but something had shifted in his expression, something Bucky couldn’t quite put his finger on. Steve gave him a pat on the cheek, the hand sliding down to rest on his shoulder again, and it stayed there when he said, “You’re in love with him.”

Just like that, Bucky’s heart began to hammer wildly in his chest, warmth rushing through him. Some of it must have been right there on his face, plain as day, because Steve was nodding even before Bucky said, “So much it hurts to look at him sometimes. Crazy, huh?”

“Not that crazy. Pretty sure he feels the same way.”

“So he says.”

“Here, chop these, I’ll get the onions before they burn.” Steve placed the tomatoes on the cutting board, turning away to face the stove, leaving Bucky staring at his back, a strange, unsettled feeling in his stomach.

“Hey,” Bucky said, but Steve was still smiling when he glanced over his shoulder. For some reason, he’d expected to see tears again. “Is that okay? I mean…”

“Okay? It’s better than okay, Bucky,” Steve insisted. He turned down the heat on the stove a bit before grabbing the garlic Bucky had chopped, adding it to the pot with a soft smile playing at his lips. “You have no idea how good it feels, seeing you happy again. Both of you.”

“Yeah?”

Bucky found himself wrapped up Steve’s arms again, so he hugged back, even though he was still feeling confused, as if he’d done something he wasn’t supposed to, had disappointed Steve somehow by falling in love.
“You should see your face when you talk about him.”

When Steve pulled back this time the smile was in his eyes as well, leaving Bucky wondering if he might have been imagining things all along.

“We’ve all been able to see it, but just now…” Steve shrugged, looking a bit embarrassed. “I don’t know why, but it just hit me in a different way.”

Steve’s face was lit up with genuine happiness and affection, so much so that anyone else would likely have missed the bit of sadness that had returned, an almost haunted look in his eyes. Bucky could see it. He thought of the state Steve had been in after last visiting Peggy in the nursing home, of how hard it must be seeing her so frail, almost as unstuck from time as they were, due to her memory issues.

“It’s not fair, though,” Bucky insisted, swallowing down a wave of guilt. “You deserve a happy ending, and I feel like…”

Thankfully, Steve cut him off, a firm, “Hey,” preventing Bucky from finishing the sentence, the words (I stole that from you. I did, didn’t I?) never spoken. It was probably a good thing, because a small, scared part of Bucky felt like Steve didn’t even recognize the reality of those words, of what might have been, and maybe only would if they hung in the air between them, unable to be unsaid, unheard, and unfelt.

“I got a happy ending,” Steve insisted, and that was his Captain America voice—no arguing allowed. “It wasn’t the one I imagined for myself, but I’m here. You’re here,” he added, mussing up Bucky’s hair, his mouth quirked up on one side. “I found a new family, to boot. Sure, they’re all crazy, but who isn’t?”

Bucky smiled, swallowed his apologies and guilt, because it was obvious Steve didn’t want them. “Not what you expected when bringing me back, though, is it?”

"It's actually kind of, well… comforting?"

"Comforting. Really.” Bucky arched an eyebrow.

"Think of all of the things that had to happen in order to bring the two of you together,” Steve pointed out.

More than anything, he looked embarrassed, a hand scrubbing at the back of his neck, his chin ducked down a bit, but the smile was still there. This was all Steve Rogers, and none of Captain America.

"I like to believe there's a point to all of this," he continued, and when he gestured around them with his hands he clearly wasn't talking about the kitchen. "Sometimes... sometimes it's hard to hold onto that belief."

“And me and Tony makes that easier?” Bucky couldn’t help but sound incredulous.

Steve shrugged, his smile wide, eyes shining with affection. “Think of how far you’ve come, Bucky. Both of you. If that isn’t reason to have hope, to believe, I don’t know what is.”

Bucky worried at his lower lip, studying Steve's face. "I'm gonna be okay," he said, and it was curious to hear himself saying that, actually believing it. "That's because of you, Steve. You never gave up on me. I know I haven't been the best friend, but..."
"Stop right there," Steve insisted. "You haven't done anything wrong, Buck, you've been getting better the only way you knew how. You were never a bad friend, got it?"

"Got it," Bucky answered, and although he still disagreed, he let it go, just let that happy, familiar feeling of spending time with his best friend wash over him again. "No point arguing with you, anyway, you're stubborn as a mule."

Steve gestured to the cutting board, "Back to work, chop-chop."

Bucky saluted him, and refocused on the tomatoes. "Where'd you learn to make lasagna anyway?"

"It's called the internet," Steve deadpanned. "I'm surprised Tony hasn't mentioned it, yet."
Invariably, when they spent time together, Bucky and Natasha found themselves lapsing into Russian. It wasn’t intentional, and depending on their company it wasn’t even exclusionary; Coulson spoke Russian, Clint had no trouble whatsoever following along, although much like Tony he preferred speaking English (it was too easy to pick on Tony’s accent), and Thor spoke every language.

Bucky suspected it was as nice for her as it was for him, which was strange in a way considering how he’d learned the language. The peculiar thing was, the feeling of it on his tongue was comforting and oddly natural, and these days he felt no need to deny himself the pleasure of enjoying one of the good side effects of his stint as a brainwashed assassin.

There was something very specific Bucky wanted to make with Natasha, and was hopeful she already knew how, or would be interested in them learning together. She had seemed quite pleased when Bucky approached her, slipping immediately into Russian when requesting a cooking lesson, but her sly smile absolutely transformed her features when he expressed his desire to make black bread, of all things.

"I've tried some of the bakeries, but," he shrugged.

Natasha hummed her agreement, head tipping to the side as she studied him. "Not the same, I know. No sharing my recipe, or I'll have to kill you."

Bucky grinned, saying, "Sounds fair enough," as he pulled his hair back into a little topknot.

"Alright then," Natasha cracked her knuckles and headed for the kitchen, adding, "Why stop there? We should make zakuski, go all out. We’ll need a few things. Clint?"

"Y’ello!"

By now, Bucky was accustomed enough to life with Clint Barton that it didn’t even surprise him when the man dropped down out of the ceiling, throwing a little salute at Natasha upon landing. It was actually indicative of how much better he was that Clint no longer refrained from doing anything "surprising" around him, so in the spirit of recognizing his progress, and appreciating Clint’s inclusiveness, Bucky gave him a comradely slap on the shoulder on his way into the kitchen.

"Pick up a few things for me, and we’ll share when everything is done," she instructed, patting the side of his face before beginning to rummage through the communal refrigerator. “Herring, caviar—you know the kind—and… how do we not have eggplant? Beets, too. Oh, and don’t forget the vodka."

"Groceries and Русский Стандарт, coming up," Clint answered with another salute, and before there was time to thank him, he was on his way.

"Does he really sleep in the vents?"

"Most of the time he's not even up there. He just likes us to think he is."

Bucky laughed at this, because of course Clint would want to keep people guessing. "In his more paranoid moments, Tony swears Clint watches us sleep." Natasha laughed softly.
at this, her smile only growing when Bucky added, "I told him if that was the case, we should count ourselves lucky, because it meant Clint liked us best."

"I'm glad someone else here understands him."

There would have been a time (in the not too distant past, really) when Bucky would have laughed at the idea of tolerating, let alone liking and understanding, Clint. Now, although he'd grown to love and appreciate all of the Avengers, Clint held a special place in his heart.

When he wanted (or needed) to get all hot and bothered about guns, he went to Clint, and they could talk, serious conversation invariably sneaking in there between the jokes and teasing, or gushing over weapons, or shooting targets.

Really, he credited Clint with helping him past the tipping point, somehow able to get through where no one else had before, so that Bucky found himself slowly, steadily letting go of the guilt. He’d never be the same, but more and more he was convinced that was for the best.

“Clint’s a good ‘bro’,” Bucky explained, using air quotes (the air quotes always cracked Tony up for some reason), “or so he keeps telling me.”

Bucky watched as Natasha dug up actual paper (Tony would break out in hives) and a pen, and began jotting down ingredients, along with instructions. “He likes you.”

“I like him.”

The sly smile was back, and there was no denying that it suited Natasha very well. She studied Bucky from behind a wall of red hair, her eyes probing enough to make his neck grow warm, asking, “Can you get drunk?”

“Not sure,” he answered carefully, and her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “At first, I was scared to try,” mostly because he was worried if he was able to, he might not ever sober up again, “and then Tony gave up drinking.”

Natasha had seen Tony up close and personal during some of his more well known low points, so Bucky didn’t feel the need to explain further. Besides, she was likely fully aware that there were still days when Tony struggled to keep himself away from the bottle. Bucky made it a point not to drink if Tony was home, and even if he did decide to have a little something when Tony was out of town, it was never more than a beer or two, usually with Clint or Steve.

“Interesting.” She slid the paper across the counter. “Start assembling the ingredients. Today requires vodka. Quite a bit, in fact. Are you okay with that?”

He was almost certainly in the same boat as Steve, so the likelihood of him actually managing to get drunk was slim to none, and Tony wasn’t due to get back from Malibu until the following day, so…

“I think I am. For science, of course.”

Bucky had, in retrospect, perhaps not fully comprehended what he was getting himself into. Natasha informed him that good cooking happened in tandem with good drinking, and so once Clint returned with (an obscene amount of) vodka, and their missing ingredients, the shots began.
It turned out, making bread took quite a bit of time, and that the bionic arm was excellent when it came to kneading dough. Natasha’s recipe for black bread was as full of secrets as she was. He suspected the drinking was part of a nefarious plot to ensure he couldn’t remember everything that went in, and in that regard she was successful.

While waiting for the dough to rise before returning to the bread, they had pickled various items, assembled “Herring Under a Fur Coat,” scolded Clint several times for trying to dip into the Tsar Nicoulai Golden Reserve caviar early, and toasted each other with shot after shot of vodka. It hadn’t escaped his notice that they had him taking three drinks for every one of theirs.

By the time the sun went down, Bucky’s head was tingling pleasantly, Clint was wearing a permanent cockeyed expression, and Natasha had her hair in braided pigtails, courtesy of Bucky. Thor had taught him well.

More importantly, the coffee table in the living room was covered in food, the black bread was a success, and Bucky was almost certain he had actually achieved a buzz.

“M’not positive, though,” he insisted, tossing back another shot before shoving more eggplant pkhali into his mouth.

Clint laughed loudly, almost slurring his, “Dude, really? Cuz I’m positive. Yer faced.”

“Give it time,” Natasha said, and Bucky had to admire her ability to hold her liquor. Sure, her cheeks were flushed from the alcohol, her eyes a little glassy, but you’d never know it from her voice, or the way she held herself.

Bucky watched the respectful way Natasha ate the food, closing her eyes and savoring each bite, and began to follow suit. Even Clint was somewhat reverent as he ate, and Bucky found himself wondering if it was nice for Natasha, being able to enjoy something of home without having to deal with all the baggage that normally came along for the ride when thinking of her past.

“Thanks, Tasha,” he blurted, and from the floor (Clint had rolled over at some point) Clint parroted him. “Today was nice.”

“My pleasure, brat,” and that had Clint giggling, chiming in with, “Bucky’s a good brat.”

“I thought you could hold your liquor?” His lips were salty when he licked them, and Bucky found himself smiling as he watched Natasha help Clint sit back up.

“Man, Thor is gonna be pissed he missed this,” Clint mumbled. He straightened up, suddenly serious, and slammed a fist down on the table, making the plates jump. “Serves him right for leaving the planet!”

Bucky giggled, a high, unhinged sort of sound, and suddenly had Natasha and Clint’s full attention, their eyes going wide, Clint looking particularly maniacal in his pleasure.

“C’mon, that’s hilarious. I was born in 1917! If I’da told anyone that my pal couldn’t make it for dinner cuz he had to leave the planet on… on space prince business,” he didn’t bother finish the sentence with anything other than somewhat hysterical sounding laughter.

Luckily, his companions joined in, Clint’s face scrunched up and bright red, tears streaming down his cheeks as he repeatedly rocked into Natasha, howling with laughter. “Dude… dude, space prince business.”
“Right?”

Natasha dabbed at her eyes, and smiled coyly at him, looking like the cat that got the cream. “I’d say the experiment was a success.”

“Okay, fine,” Bucky wheezed, thinking of the laughter he’d shared with Steve, missing him in that moment. “I’m a little drunkish.”

“1917, that is just insane, man,” Clint shook his head.

“Name one thing about my life that isn’t insane.” Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face, fighting off another wave of giggles.

“There’s Tony,” Natasha suggested.

“Still completely insane,” Bucky disagreed. He opened a fresh bottle of vodka, and topped them each off, keeping the bottle for himself as he went for more food. “For so many, many reasons. S’just most of ‘em are really good ones.”

Natasha raised her glass. “To Tony Stark.”

“Tony!” Clint shouted, sloshing vodka everywhere as he raised his own.

“To Tony,” Bucky agreed.

The vodka made his mouth tingle for a moment, and when he closed his eyes he saw Tony. Not the polished Tony Stark of the media, or the cocksure Iron Man, but his Tony (Antoshka) covered in smudges of grease, smiling one of his vulnerable little boy smiles, eyes warm and affectionate. It made his heart just about lurch with wanting, and suddenly the idea of having to wait another day to see the man was just unbearable.

“Antoshka,” he added, softly, taking another drink.

Clint leaned across the table, almost putting his elbow in what was left of the herring dip. “Gimme me your phone,” he said, holding out his hand, and the fact that Bucky did so without asking why was (unnecessary) proof of just how successful Natasha’s experiment had been. “M’kay, I’m holding onto this til tomorrow, and JARVIS, no putting through calls.”

Bucky opened his mouth to protest, but Natasha shook her head solemnly. “Clint’s right.”

“About what?”

“Friends don’t let friends drunk dial their out of town boyfriend, especially when he’s a recovering alcoholic.”

“On this occasion, I find myself in the unfortunate position of agreeing with Agent Barton,” JARVIS added, and Bucky couldn’t help but giggle again, seeing Clint’s reaction to JARVIS’s choice of words.

“Don’t worry, we’ll keep you distracted,” Natasha added, and so Bucky did his best to shove aside the odd, empty feeling that came from being away from Tony. “Do you remember much of your time in Russia?”

“Bits and pieces,” he admitted, thinking carefully on it while slathering another piece of
bread with butter.

There was a hollow, untrustworthy feeling in his chest when he thought about those days, the early days, mostly because those memories had only recently started resurfacing. Something about them was different than remembering acts committed by the Winter Soldier, almost as if there was yet another life he had led.

His mind provided him with the image of matryoshka dolls, and he grit his teeth, wondering just how many of him there were in his head. Reflexively, as if it could push the image away, Bucky ate his bread, then took another pull from the bottle.

“What we need is singing,” Bucky said with a sigh. “The Commandos didn’t know how to get drunk without singing. S’how you keep from gettin’ miserable—singing.”

Natasha took the bottle from Bucky, helped herself to a swig, then handed it to Clint, her eyes narrowed and her pretty mouth pursed. “Do you remember any Russian songs?”

He opened his mouth to say no, but then paused, because there were words on the tip of his tongue, a melody knocking around his head, and then Bucky began to sing, softly at first, gaining confidence as the smile spread across Natasha’s face.

The next thing he knew, they were all on their feet, arms around each other, and although Clint seemed unfamiliar with the song, he was right there to support Natasha and Bucky as they sang loudly of Partisans, going to far as to cheer enthusiastically when they’d finished.

The strangest thing of all wasn’t that Bucky couldn’t even explain how it was he knew the song, it was the feelings associated with the act of singing it, because it felt like he was back in the war, but he wasn’t even sure anymore whose war it was, which army, which side; it was just the painful sensation of free falling into patriotism.

Natasha’s smile faltered slightly upon seeing his face, and he wondered what he must look like, heard himself babbling, “To die for freedom,” and wasn’t sure why his first thought was of seeing Steve for the first time since they’d said goodbye, back in New York.

Steve hadn’t been Steve anymore, but in so many ways he was more himself than he’d ever been; it was just that the Steve he was on the inside had somehow found a way out, and anyone could see what Bucky had always known. His Steve was gone, and his world was changed forever. He’d managed to transform just as drastically, the polar opposite of Steve’s experience, almost as if fate had decided to use him to balance out the scales.

“I was s’posed to do that, you know? Die for freedom.”

“I know,” Natasha had a soft, sympathetic look on her face, and Bucky’s breath caught in his chest. Before the tears could come, Natasha grabbed hold of him, warm hands on the side of his face, and pulled him into a kiss.

Her mouth was soft, and warm, and so unlike Tony’s that it took him a moment to even grasp that he was being kissed. Once on the mouth, then once on each cheek, and surprisingly, he found himself feeling better. Natasha wasn’t known for casual affection, and the fact that she was comfortable enough to count him as a member of her inner circle (he’d shot her, more than once) was something he tried not to take for granted.

“Shit, are we kissing already?” Clint all but shouted.
Before Bucky could answer one way or another, he found himself grabbed once again. Any lingering melancholy was scattered to the winds, laughter returning to take its place as Clint mashed their mouths together painfully, misjudging the distance. They each blurted, “ow,” before Clint moved on to kissing Natasha.

Not surprisingly, it was all downhill from there.

He lost track of the songs they sang, certainly lost track of time spent emptying the last bottle of vodka, and then more or less collapsed into a giggling, oblivious heap on the couch, Natasha curled against his side, Clint’s head in his lap.

“Thought it’d be stickier,” Bucky mumbled as he began to drift away, fingers carding through Clint’s hair. The archer was already snoring and possibly drooling on him. “S’soft, though.”

And with that said, he passed out.

Chapter End Notes

"brat" is Russian for brother (I hope so, anyway, haha).
Русский Стандарт = http://russianstandardvodka.com/
This is the song Bucky and Natasha sing together, and if you wondered what "Herring Under a Fur Coat" was... *cough*

I've used the movie-verse year of Bucky's birth, FYI.
“I accept with joy in my heart,” Thor declared, slapping Bucky on the back.

The oddest thing about Thor—and there were quite a few things about the son of Odin that Bucky would categorize as odd—was that he was, hands down, the best cook in the Tower. He didn’t work from recipes, he seemingly had no idea what half the ingredients he used even were, but the results were mouthwateringly delicious every single time.

“What’re we making tonight?”

“I know not. Cooking is like battle, friend, and so let us begin with reconnaissance. To the kitchen!”

Bucky smiled, and followed Thor, already thoroughly enjoying himself. When they arrived, Thor folded his arms across his chest, and nodded, the picture of seriousness.

“I put the task to you, James. Gather what supplies you think we shall need, but choose with your warrior’s heart.”

This was definitely a different way of cooking, but Bucky was more than happy to go along with it. He glanced over his shoulder as he opened the fridge, and Thor nodded encouragingly.

“Here goes nothing,” he said, and began grabbing items at random, trying not to overthink his choices, as per Thor’s instructions.

When he was finished, Bucky surveyed his haul and cringed, but Thor was walking around the kitchen island shaking his head with approval.

“We have much work to do,” Thor said solemnly, one hand on Bucky’s shoulder, “but your instincts have not failed you, James.”

There were some things Bucky felt actually went together harmoniously, based on all the cooking shows he’d been watching with Clint, and what he himself had prepared so far: apples, pork shoulder, garlic, onions, and mustard came to mind.

But then there were the bananas, which he’d grabbed for reasons he couldn’t explain, and the eggs, olives, cauliflower, coffee, tomatoes, several take out containers from dinner the night before, coconut milk, and radishes.

“A true feast awaits us.”

Thor faced him again, and Bucky had that moment, the moment Tony had assured him everyone had, repeatedly, the longer they spent time with Thor, which was sort of a weak in the knees feeling. It was part admiration, because Thor’s goodness was much like Steve’s own, and sometimes he didn’t even need to be doing anything for you to feel it rolling off of him in waves. Tony described this as Boy Scout Chic.

Mixed up in the admiration was plain old attraction (he wasn’t Bucky’s type, but there was no denying the attractiveness), because Thor was uncomfortably good looking. Again, it wasn’t just his eyes, or the way he filled out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, or even the fact that they were constantly trying to get him to wear clothes to begin with—no one could
handle Thor’s comfort level with nudity. There was something so very Thor about him, that you really didn’t have a choice when it came to finding him attractive.

The thing was, Bucky suspected the other Avengers tended to forget how old Thor was, mostly because of the almost childlike delight he took in learning of Earth, her people, traditions, and culture. It was in his eyes, though, and Bucky saw it every time, couldn’t not see it. This—the otherworldliness combined with a sense of Thor’s true age—was what tied everything together into a “make you weak in the knees” package.

Of course, there were also the times when Thor’s other-ness made him laugh, and shake his head, because somehow living with an alien (or was it demigod?) wasn’t even the weirdest part of his life.

“You choices are bold,” Thor mused, stroking his beard. “I approve.”

Oddly, the comment made Bucky swell with pleasure. “Thanks.”

Thor smiled, and studied Bucky’s face before nodding. “Let us begin! We shall need many spices.”

He hadn’t been kidding. Bucky was almost positive they’d gathered up all of the spices in the Tower. He really hoped they weren’t going to use the Old Bay Seasoning, because Vanilla was sitting right next to it, and it was making his stomach lurch just thinking about that combination.

“Divide and conquer works in the kitchen as well as in the field of battle,” Thor explained, and he began grouping items, occasionally pausing to hold something up for discussion. “This banana,” Thor explained, taking one from the bunch and holding it aloft, “we might smash, or slice. What do your instincts tell you?”

Bucky took the banana from Thor, studied it for a minute, and then pushed aside his fear of choosing incorrectly. “I say sliced, battered, and deep fried.”

“Excellent answer,” Thor clapped him on the back, and set the banana aside.

None of what they did really made much sense, as far as Bucky could tell, but it sure was a lot of fun. Slowly but surely, food was grouped, then spices, and then the cooking actually began. Every burner had a pot or pan on it, there were items in the oven, the bananas were prepped and set aside so they could be fried.

Thankfully it turned out they weren’t going to be using all of the spices. Thor enjoyed seeing all of the spices lined up, as he couldn’t be bothered to learn the names of them, and admitted to Bucky he made his selections based solely upon color, and smell. Bucky couldn’t argue that this was a pretty solid approach.

Somewhere in the thick of their culinary battle, there was a moment when nothing needed stirring, seasoning, flipping, or rescuing from almost certain demise. He had to admit, it smelled amazing, and the bits they’d tasted so far left him pleasantly surprised.

In the moment of calm, he found himself studying Thor, wondering if it was difficult for him, being so far away from home. He, like all of the Avengers, had come to think of the Tower’s residents as family, and Thor also had his relationship with Jane, and friendship with Darcy, but Bucky suspected Thor often felt the sort of homesick he and Steve felt; they were all of them from different worlds, in a way.
“Hey, how’s your brother doing?” Bucky almost regretted blurting out the question, until he saw how much it pleased Thor that he had asked.

“Loki is well, although up to his old tricks, I suspect,” and the thing was, Loki’s tricks usually resulted in all Hell breaking loose, but you wouldn’t think as much from Thor’s tone of voice.

“I guess the others aren’t exactly comfortable talking about him, huh?”

Thor’s smile was sad. "Steven asks after him often, but he is alone in this. It saddens me to say Loki has earned the lack of regard our fellow Avengers show him."

Of course Steve asked, that was just like him, and it made Bucky smile. "Well, I haven't met him, so consider me all ears."

Thor’s face grew cloudy, brows drawn together in confusion, but then his eyes widened and he laughed. "This is another one of your sayings," he declared. "I shall take you up on the offer, James, but conversations of my brother require no small measure of mead."

Bucky winced. "No drinking for me for a while."

"Ah, yes, I heard tell of your feast. It saddens me to have missed it."

It wasn’t really like he’d done anything wrong, exactly, but Bucky still felt guilty about managing to find a way to get drunk. It might not have weighed as heavily on his mind, if Steve hadn’t come home and found them passed out on the couch together. That was bad enough (he felt like he’d let Steve down, and again, he wasn’t sure why) but Steve had taken a photo and sent it to Tony.

For his part, Tony seemed to find the whole thing hilarious. Anything in the Tower with the ability to display digital photography had been modified to showcase the three of them, Clint drooling on Bucky’s crotch, Natasha curled against his side, looking like a little girl, and Bucky snoring away obliviously, mouth wide open and head lolled back, hand still in Clint’s hair. Tellingly, the original photo had been cropped to hide the empty bottles of vodka that had been surrounding them.

Bucky had tried to apologize when he had a moment alone with Tony, but had been brushed off, Tony quickly changing the topic in a way that let Bucky know he shouldn’t push. It wouldn’t have bothered him quite as much, but for the fact that before he’d had to head to Malibu, Tony had been spending an inordinate amount of time in the workshop, and since returning had revoked everyone’s access, Bucky’s included.

He’d tried to talk to him about that, too, after Tony had returned. Several times in fact, but he’d had little luck. The last time he’d tried, Tony had all but begged him for a bit of time, and space, and understanding. Bucky had kissed him, told him he wasn’t going anywhere, and so began the waiting game.

Meanwhile, the only thing Tony would say on the topic of the Great Vodka Adventure was that Bucky was lucky his metabolism kicked into overdrive while he slept, which meant the extent of his hangover had been being thirsty and hungry as hell. One big breakfast later, and he was as good as new.

"So colossally unfair," Clint had complained, though Bucky had a hard time (pun intended) ignoring the penis drawn on Clint's forehead while listening to him gripe.
Mostly, he was impressed Tony had convinced Steve to draw on them at all, let alone brand Hawkeye a dickhead.

"I'm happy to listen while you drink," Bucky offered.

“I thank you,” Thor replied, and Bucky made a mental note to ask about Loki again, soon. “But enough, for now. Let us finish, before my heart grows heavy.”

Bucky nodded, and gave him a pat on the shoulder, even as he wondered how some of the conversations had gone between Thor and Steve. It wasn’t that long ago that he’d have comfortably compared himself to Loki, being Steve’s brother in all the ways that mattered. He and Loki had each destroyed lives, cutting a swath of blood and destruction through the world, only now… Well, now Bucky could actually see the differences between them, even if there were still days when he struggled to hold onto his hard won understanding.

“Is it bad that I’ve got no clue what we’re making?”

Thor laughed at this, and spread his arms wide. “A feast!”

Apparently, that was answer enough, so they got back to work, and after another forty minutes or so, the table was covered with bowls of something that looked questionable, but smelled amazing.

Steve took the first bite, which was only fitting, being their fearless leader at all, shrugged, and tucked in with enthusiasm. “I have no idea what this is, but you’ve outdone yourself, fellas.”

“It has deep fried things on top, so I’m down.” Clint tucked into his helping, shaking his head, pointing at Thor with his fork. “It’s magic right? Did you watch him the entire time, Barnes?”

“I didn’t see any magic.”

“Our friend here has true culinary instincts,” Thor explained.

Bruce held up his spoon, staring in wonder, before taking another bite. “It really does boggle the mind. Nothing about this should work, and yet…”

“Save some for the lab.” Tony plopped down in his seat, and reached under the table to squeeze Bucky’s thigh, naturally having been the last one to make it to the table.

Bucky watched as Tony took his first bite, then the second, then the third, and then he held up his spoon much as Bruce had done, and turned to stare at Bucky, eyes scrunched up in concentration. “This has coffee in it. You put coffee in my dinner.”

“Yup.”

“Best boyfriend ever.”

“How can you even tell?” Clint demanded to know, even as Tony began eating with renewed vigor, making little happy noises in between mouthfuls. “There are like a billion flavors.”

“Good use of the radish,” was all Natasha said, but her eyes were bright with happiness.
Bucky looked around the table, and shared a smile with Thor. He had no idea what they’d made, or how it even worked, wouldn’t be able to recreate it if he tried, but he was sharing food with his family, and that was what mattered.
"Because the ladies love dessert," Clint explained patiently. "Hell, anyone who doesn't love dessert is either lying, or not to be trusted. Fact."

Bucky eyed him skeptically, purposefully refusing to acknowledge the apron Clint was wearing, which read "Keep Calm and Shoot Arrows."

"Bacon doesn't normally go in cookies though," Bucky argued, "does it?"

"It does when I'm making the cookies. Get fryin'!"

With a shrug, Bucky loaded up the pan with bacon, and did as instructed, while Clint hopped up onto the counter to watch, his feet kicking out in front of him while he whistled an unfamiliar tune, and took the occasional pull from his beer.

"How much longer before the new arm is ready?"

Bucky shrugged, poking at the bacon. "I'm not supposed to know he's making a new one, remember?"

He could actually hear Clint rolling his eyes, which was impressive, really. "C'mon, he knows you know. And what does it matter, anyway?"

Biting back a sigh, Bucky shrugged again. "He doesn't want to talk about it right now, so I'm going to respect that."

"Tony is the king of upgrades," Clint continued. "Make sure you get that nice and crispy, man. Each time I think, "this is the ultimate!" he somehow finds a way to make it even better."

"You'd think he was a genius or something," Bucky deadpanned, and Clint swatted at his head with a potholder.

"Betcha the arm is hotrod red, with gold accents." Bucky opened his mouth to argue, but instead just laughed, because it was entirely within the realm of possibility. "Either that, or it'll dispense lube and have built in vibration features."

The scariest thing was, this was also a legitimate possibility. "Please don't give him ideas," Bucky begged, eyeing his arm with a little frown playing at his lips. "You know it'd all go horribly wrong."

"All I'm saying is, tell me if he hooks you up. The pranks we could pull?" he made a soft, appreciative noise, shaking his head almost wistfully. "Epic."

"The Prank Truce is only three days old, Clint, you can’t go plotting already. Steve will end you, count on it."

Bucky ignored Clint's grumbling while moving the bacon to the paper towels, but there were words like "stupid" and "not my fault, anyway" and "fucking Wade" being muttered under his breath.

"So is the arm on the fritz?" Clint asked after he was done venting.
“Working just fine.”

“Hmm.” Clint snagged a piece of the bacon, his eyes scrunched up in thought as he slowly chewed it. “So why’s he building a new one? I mean, he’s got plenty of shit to keep him busy, and I’m pretty sure the dude is more attached to the thing than *you* are.”

Clint, in that Clint way of his, had hit on the very issue that had been worrying at the back of Bucky’s mind. It wasn’t unlike Tony to want to keep certain projects under wraps while he was in the middle of prototyping, and he was a fan of surprising his teammates with new equipment, but there was clearly something *other* than work going on with the engineer as of late.

Even when being secretive, Tony had never kept Bucky out of the workshop before. If he was being honest, the cooking lessons were doubling as distractions lately, a good way to keep his mind from heading off in dark directions while he allowed Tony the time he’d requested.

“Uh oh,” Clint hopped off of the counter, his face suddenly far too serious. “Did you guys have a fight? Is this one of his trademarked over the top apology gestures?”

“No,” Bucky insisted, then lost confidence, adding, “at least, I don’t think so.”

“You guys are good, right?” Clint looked so concerned that Bucky found himself touched, which was warring with his irritation. He had been trying very, very hard to not question whether everything was okay between them, but now Clint had him doubting himself all over again.

“He’s not pissed about us getting pissed, is he?” Clint asked, then interrupted himself with, “Wait, no, why would he be building you something badass if *he* was mad? Does he think you’re mad? Did you give him shit for having Steve draw all over us, because…”

“Clint, stop,” Bucky all but begged, but Clint just continued on with, “he’s really good at hiding how much shit hurts his feelings, you gotta watch out for that.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” Bucky shouted, throwing his arms up in the air. “I wish I did, but I don’t, okay? *Fuck*, Barton.”

Clint’s eyes were wide, but narrowed rather quickly, his expression turning grim. “Look, I know we don’t seem like the bestest of buddies all the time, but Tony has my back, and I got his. I got yours, too, asshole, so sorry if I’m concerned, and wanna make sure everything is okay between my friends.”

“I’m sorry.” Bucky said, meaning it. “You’ve got me worried this is some;” he swallowed past the lump in his throat, not finishing the sentence (“consolation prize, to soften the blow when he ends it.”), because that wasn’t fair to Tony.

Instead, he took a deep breath, saying, “We agreed a while ago that only one of us is allowed to be insecure, and Tony called dibbs. For whatever reason, he needs to do this, and doesn’t want to say why yet.”

“Sorry,” Clint was wide eyed again. “Seriously, I’m an idiot, ignore me.”

Since he was Clint, he managed to immediately address the thought Bucky had left unvoiced.
“There’s no way he’s dumping you, man, the guy is nuts about you. If it’s even anything at all, it’d have to be the Tony Stark equivalent of an engagement ring.”

Now Bucky was the wide eyed one, because the idea of Tony proposing marriage would never have occurred to him. “You’re trying to kill me with words, aren’t you?”

“Would you say yes?”

Bucky groaned loudly, hiding his face behind his hands, only answering once he felt Clint preparing to open his damned mouth again. “Of course I would! Can we just make the cookies? Please?”

Clint huffed loudly. “Fine. Get the chocolate chips.” He was quiet for all of five seconds. “See, this is a perfect example of how caring gets you exactly nowhere.”

“How do I make you shut up?” Bucky asked, staring at the bag of chocolate chips he was holding as if it had answers for him. “Kiss you?”

“No way, man, I split my lip open on your stupid teeth last time,” Clint laughed.

“Last time?”

Sure enough, when Bucky turned around to confirm what he already knew to be true, Tony was standing there, his eyebrows raised, arms folded across his chest. Bucky opened his mouth, feeling guilty, even though he really had nothing to feel guilty about, but Clint was already talking.

“Blame Tasha, she started it.”

“She’s still not talking to me, which—can I just say?—so unfair,” Tony answered, and he didn’t appear to be upset, so Bucky relaxed a bit. “Sure, it was my idea, but Steve’s the one who drew all over you drunken idiots. Should have just listened to me in the first place, but no,” Tony took several steps into the kitchen, eyebrow quirking a bit, “he thought we could leave you kids unsupervised. See if that happens again.”

“Aww,” Clint moaned, “c’mon, Mom! It was one time!”

“One time too many,” Tony insisted. “Trust is earned, young man.” He shifted his laser focus onto Bucky. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Bucky made to leave the kitchen, but Clint held up a hand, and walked out, calling, “You’ve got 15 minutes. If I see anything traumatizing when I get back, I’m suing the shit out of you, Stark.”

Tony watched him leave, then turned to face Bucky, smiling one of his fake smiles; none of it touched his eyes. “Did Nat actually kiss you?”

“A quick, comradely one,” Bucky insisted. “I actually forgot about it, until Clint said something.”

“Mmm hmm, sure,” Tony stepped closer, and then closer still, so Bucky wrapped an arm around his waist, and brought their foreheads together. “I snuck out of a meeting,” Tony explained, “Pepper’s gonna hunt me down any minute now.”

His mouth quirked a bit at the sides, the way it did when he was upset about something but
try ing to hide it, and Bucky frowned. The expression was far too familiar these days.

“Everything okay?”

Tony sighed, long and loud. “Yeah, sure, of course. Well, no, not really. Pep and I are handling a bunch of shit I’d rather not deal with right now.” He pressed his face against Bucky’s neck, and then began babbling, “The wedding is coming up, and I’m pretty sure she’s planning on having kids, which means any day now she’s going to quit, and I suck at this, James, seriously, I’m R&D all the way, the Board fucking hates me as it is, because no matter how hard I try I’m an embarrassment…”

“Hey, hey,” he pulled out of the embrace in order to get a better look at Tony’s face, and once he saw what was there, Bucky had to kiss him on the forehead. “Stop talking about yourself like that, none of it is true. Tell me how I can help.”

Tony sighed again, slumping almost comically, before looking up at Bucky with a hangdog expression. “You don’t want a company by any chance, do you? No? You can run it into the ground if you want, I’m kinda okay with that idea, right now.”

“No you’re not.” Bucky made a little twirling motion with his fingers, and Tony turned around, groaning in pleasure when Bucky began giving him a shoulder rub. “If that was the case, you’d just run it into the ground yourself.”

“Mm. True.”

“Have you actually tried talking to Pepper about this?”

Tony tipped his head back, and sighed again, “No, obviously, because that would be the mature approach. I thought it’d be more me to lock myself in the bathroom, have a panic attack, then sneak out so I could hide up here while you make me feel better.”

“You had a panic attack?” Bucky turned Tony back around so they were facing each other, his stomach tight, because Tony wouldn’t look him in the eyes. “Antoshka,” he said softly, and Tony smiled a tiny self deprecating smile, his eyes suspiciously bright when he finally looked up.

“Should have led with that, huh?”

Bucky wanted to demand to know why Tony hadn’t let JARVIS notify him, but he knew what it was like when your mind and your body betrayed you. Sometimes you needed someone else there with you, and other times, the very idea of it was nauseating. The last thing he’d do was begrudge Tony getting through the attack the best way he knew how.

It did make him feel like a colossal asshole, though, considering the conversation he’d been having with Clint. Tony didn’t trust easy, certainly didn’t accept help from just anyone, and while he’d needed some time before doing so, Bucky had been the first person he’d sought out after the attack. Bucky decided he needed to stop being an idiot, so he let go of the notion he was getting dumped, and refocused on Tony, and helping him.

“I’m just glad you came up here,” Bucky insisted, and that was definitely relief on Tony’s face. “How you doing now?”

Tony shrugged, but his smile was still wobbly around the edges. “Better-ish,” he insisted, running his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “You kinda have this, uh, uplifting effect on me. Okay, now that I’ve said that out loud it totally sounds like a dick joke, but I’m serious.”
Bucky smiled, and stroked Tony’s cheek. “Well, I’m glad I have that effect on you. Did you want me to come with you?” Tony’s eyebrows rose comically, and Bucky shook his head. “To talk to Pepper, not... You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony agreed, his voice affectionate. “How do you do that, anyway? Nothings changed—it’s probably worse, because now Pepper is definitely mad at me—but I feel 82.6% better. Just hearing your voice when stepping off the elevator...”

Bucky cut him off there, because he needed to kiss Tony. Slowly, tenderly, until Tony had both hands in Bucky’s hair, and was kissing back, the tension leaving his body.

“Maybe it’s because you know I’ve got your back,” Bucky finally answered, resting his forehead against Tony’s again. “Always will, Antoshka.”

As far as declarations went, Bucky was sure it fell a little short, but you wouldn’t have thought so looking at Tony’s face; you’d have thought Bucky had just given him the world. Tony had to clear his throat before saying, “See, the crazy thing is, I actually believe you when you say that.”

Sadly, Tony’s trust issues had been earned the hard way. Bucky was certain there was still a voice in his head (it would sound like Howard) that insisted the only reason he was an Avenger at all was because of his money, and his ability to invent useful bits of technology. That if things began to sour with Stark Industries and the cash stopped flowing, the team would scatter like rats from a sinking ship.

“Believe it, Antoshka,” Bucky said, holding his gaze. “I’m not going anywhere, no matter what. And neither is anyone else.”

Tony flinched, and looked away. “Okay, no fair, you know me too well. This is an awful conversation, and I officially hate it.”

“No you don’t, you’re just uncomfortable because you know I’m right.” It was strange, how affection could make Tony squirm in ways abuse never did. “We all love you, Tony.”

“It’s true,” Clint said, and Tony jumped, his face turning bright red in front of Bucky’s eyes. “Sorry, but I did warn you about the time limit. Just so you know, I only heard the last part, the bit about loving you, which we do, idiot.”

“You know, Barton,” Tony began, but when he turned around to face the archer, he was pulled into a hug, and the words just died out with a squeak. Clint met Bucky’s eyes over Tony’s shoulder, but then looked away, seemingly as embarrassed as Tony was.

“Yes, stuck with us. Handle it,” Clint said, giving Tony one more squeeze before releasing him. He smoothed Tony’s expensive suit, then cleared his throat. “Want to help us make cookies? They have chocolate and peanut butter chips, bacon, and crushed pretzels in them—they’re state of the badass art.”

“Aliens!”

Bucky felt embarrassed for blurting out the reference (he absolutely blamed Steve for that particular bad habit) until he noticed Tony had apparently given up on feeling unloved. He was laughing, and shucking his jacket, seemingly preparing to join them.

“You know I actually built a working prototype of the M41A Pulse Rifle?” he said
casually, rolling up his sleeves.

“Dude, how long have we known each other? Why am I only just hearing about this?” Clint demanded to know. “With the grenades and everything?”

“The whole enchilada,” Tony insisted. “I’ll dig it out of storage for you later, don’t let me forget.”

So they made cookies with Clint, and then they ate them while watching Aliens, right up until Pepper arrived to drag Tony away. His eyes met Bucky’s as he followed Pepper to the elevator, and there was something different there, something outside of the gratitude, and the obvious affection. Whatever it was, Bucky liked seeing it there, especially when Tony mouthed, “I love you,” before the elevator doors closed.

“So, you two good?” Clint kept his eyes glued to the screen as he asked.

“I think so,” Bucky answered, and Clint handed him another cookie, and gave him a friendly slap on the back.
Bruce was comfortable with silence in all the ways Tony wasn’t, and Bucky liked that about him. Sharing a quiet space with Bruce never felt weighty, or charged with tension, as his silences were always purposeful, and contemplative.

The nice thing about this was when Bruce broke the silence to speak with you, it was for a reason. He didn't do mindless small talk and, as an added bonus, he was an active listener. Considering where his comfort level with conversation had been when he'd first joined them in the Tower, it wasn't surprising Bucky had always appreciated this about Bruce.

When Bruce asked, "Have you stuck with the meditation?" Bucky knew he was legitimately interested in the answer.

"Not as much as I should’ve," he admitted, catching the slight curve of Bruce's smile in his peripheral vision. "The breathing exercises on the other hand," he shrugged. "Very good for grounding myself. I guess that's a mini-meditation."

Bruce nodded. "Absolutely."

Bucky liked Bruce's approach to cooking, which mirrored his careful approach to working in the lab. They'd started out with Bruce clearly explaining what they were making, the process involved, the supplies needed, the flavor profiles they hoped to create, so that Bucky almost felt as if they'd already prepared the meal together, and were just going through the motions.

This preliminary phase was accomplished while they cleaned their workspace. Clint's most recent popcorn experiment had gone horribly wrong, and he was forbidden to enter the kitchen (even to clean it) for 48 hours. Bucky didn’t mind, though, because the cleaning in and of itself was a sort of relaxing precursor to the preparation of the curry.

Once everything was sparkling, they’d gathered their ingredients, and began carefully washing vegetables, Bucky mimicking the way Bruce ritualistically turned, and turned, and gently stroked the produce while running it under the water.

Bruce could be so zen most of the time, it was easy to forget what a terrible balancing act it actually was for him. Even before he’d gotten to know Bruce, Bucky had picked up on the ever present undercurrent of anger just waiting to be tapped into. At the time, Bucky had felt he was more or less in the same boat as Bruce, just drowning in fear and self loathing instead of anger. This knowledge made Bruce seem that much more impressive, in Bucky’s eyes.

"Thanks, by the way." Bruce arched an eyebrow and Bucky added, "for helping me out with that. I can't remember if I ever thanked you."

"You did, but you're welcome again. You seem to be doing well with the recent changes."

Bucky nodded. "Getting used to it. Maybe it's too easy. Sort of waiting for the other shoe to drop, honestly."

"In what regard?"

Bucky sighed, and let himself focus on his careful dicing of the potatoes rather than his
accelerating heartbeat. "After everything, it seems wrong. Being so comfortable with the violence."

"Ah, you're feeling guilty about not feeling guilty."

"When you put it like that it sounds stupid," Bucky laughed. "But yeah. That's about the gist of it."

"Have you talked to anyone about this?"

"Tony," he answered, "Sam, too, at Tony's suggestion. Steve."

"Good," Bruce seemed genuinely pleased to hear it. "I hope you realize what a long way you've come."

"Had a lot of help getting here."

"Still, don't short change yourself," Bruce said softly. "The world is full of people who had help, but never learned to accept it, let alone help others, for that matter."

Bucky smiled at this, feeling embarrassed for reasons he couldn't explain. "Not sure I've helped anyone else."

"Really?" Bruce dried his hands on the dish towel and waited until Bucky was looking at him before continuing. "I'd argue that we've all benefited in one way or another through the very act of helping you."

This remark actually caught Bucky by surprise, because it'd never occurred to him. Bruce saw it written all over his face, and shook his head, saying, "You and Tony are so alike sometimes it's actually disturbing."

"Hm, Tony would ask if you were referring to us both being good looking brunettes with excellent hair," Bucky pointed out, enjoying the way Bruce's eyes crinkled up in amusement.

He knew what Bruce meant though—their tendency to underestimate their own self worth. "I'm trying. He is, too."

"I can tell." Bruce adjusted his glasses and carefully, as if he was handling something particularly delicate, asked, "Has he spoken to you about the arm yet?"

Bucky tensed up, then took a deep breath and willed himself to relax again. It had reached the point where being asked about Tony's project automatically had him clenching his fists at his sides as if he was under attack.

"Like I told Clint, I'm trying to respect his need to do whatever it is he's doing." Bucky moved on to dicing the onions, and focused on his breathing. "He'll talk to me when he's ready."

Much like Natasha, Bruce wasn't the sort to touch people, so it was telling that he placed a hand on Bucky's shoulder, a there and gone gesture of comfort.

"That's good," he said, and the carefulness had left his voice, replaced with approval, as if Bruce had been worried about Bucky's answer. "If it's any consolation, I think he's close."
"I'm not going anywhere," Bucky said with a shrug, wishing the whole thing didn't worry him quite so much.

The quiet stretched out between them, slightly less comfortable than before, and Bucky's mind wandered. He had the sneaking suspicion that Bruce knew what was going on with Tony as of late.

A small, petty part of him flared in jealousy, a sort of unfair possessiveness, as if he alone had the right to Tony's thoughts, and feelings. He'd learned not to suppress these feelings, but instead just allowed himself to experience them fully before setting them aside, and moving on.

Once this was accomplished, he was in a better place to be thankful someone knew. At least Tony had been able to turn to Bruce, rather than internalizing everything. Really, that was kind of a big deal, considering this was the same guy who, even after his house had been smashed into the sea, hadn't thought to reach out to any of the Avengers for help when dealing with The Mandarin.

"I'm glad you're his friend," Bucky said, and it was Bruce's turn to look surprised.

"Me too."

This time, the silence was companionable, and the two fell into a nice rhythm of chopping, sautéing, and seasoning, the room filling with the aromatic scent of tempering spices. Bucky’s favorite part was making the samosas, as he could lose himself in careful attention to detail, and repetition.

They checked on their rice, adjusted the flame, tasted and added more salt where needed. Bucky lost track of time, happy in his work. It wasn’t until he heard a familiar clicking noise behind him that he realized Steve had wandered in, and taken a picture of them. The smile he was wearing said he was up to something.

“What?”

“Cooking Bros,” Steve pointed out. “Tony will love it.”

“Science Bros is still better,” Clint insisted, stepping out from behind Steve, and making everyone else jump in the process.

“Out,” Steve said, not bothering to look at Clint, just hooking a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the direction Clint should be heading. “You still have at least 33 hours on the clock. If I catch you in here again, I’m resetting it.”

“Tony would let me,” Clint grumbled. “He probably doesn’t even care, and he owns the place, so I don’t see why…”

“Well, I care, so scram. Ten, nine, eight…”

With a loud noise of disbelief, Clint marched out of the kitchen, muttering his protest under his breath.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately.” Steve shook his head, and Bucky burst out laughing, because how could he not. “Don’t you start.”

“Sorry, Dad.”
Bucky earned himself a patiently amused look from Steve. “Need any help with dinner?”

“You can always set the table,” Bruce suggested. “JARVIS, could you give Tony the countdown?”

“It would be my pleasure, Dr. Banner.”

“Let him know I’m coming down to get him this time if he tries to skip it,” Steve added, grabbing silverware. “He’s missed enough meals as it is, lately.”

JARVIS didn’t reply to this request, but Bucky did. “You know how he gets.”

Beside him, Bruce removed his glasses in order to clean them, sharing a quick glance with Bucky as Steve answered, “Yeah, I do,” with a little more force than was necessary. “Enough to know something’s been bothering him.”

“Wait a minute,” Bucky removed the curry from the heat, his jaw working. He knew he was a little tightly wound about Tony these days, but was pretty sure he wasn’t imagining the undercurrent of accusation in Steve’s words. “You think that’s my fault?”

“I didn’t say that,” Steve had the decency to look abashed, and Bucky wondered if he had any idea how his tone had come across. “He gets all caught up in his head, Bucky, and sometimes you have to help him back out again.”

Bucky answered as carefully as possible, thinking of Bruce beside him (deep breath, count down from ten), reminding himself that just because he wouldn’t turn into the Hulk didn’t mean he shouldn’t control his temper. “There’s helping, and there’s forcing, Steve. He asked for time, so I’m giving him time.”

The look on Steve’s face went a long way towards calming him down, because Bucky could see he was mortified, perhaps only just realizing that it sounded like he was backseat driving Bucky’s relationship with Tony.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, and it was clear he meant it.

“No problem.” Bucky stuck his hand out, and Steve shook it, then allowed Bucky to pull him into a hug. “I know you’re just worried about him.”

“Still, it’s not my place.”

“You’re his friend, aren’t you? Course it is.”

He couldn’t help but notice Bruce looked like he wanted to be just about anywhere else. Bucky did his best to apologize with his eyes, and got a halfhearted smile in response.

He was starting to worry he’d wind up deck ing the next person that felt it necessary to point out the glaringly obvious fact that not all was right with their resident mad genius. If Tony didn’t talk to him soon, Bucky wouldn’t have much choice in the matter, he’d have to push him, something he wasn’t comfortable with at all.

Bucky transferred the rice to a large serving bowl, grabbed a spoon, and handed it to Steve, who took things from there.

"Sorry," Bucky said once Steve was out of earshot.
"It's fine." Bruce was frowning down at the curry as he transferred it to a serving dish. "I don't think you were necessarily out of line there," he added softly.

Before Bucky could respond, they heard a particular sort of commotion that could only mean Tony had actually emerged from the workshop. Bucky made a mental note to ask JARVIS if he’d bothered to pass on Steve’s part of the message, as he suspected the answer was a resounding “no.”

"You heard Steve," and Bucky assumed he was talking to Clint, "I don't know why you think I'm going to give you a different answer. 32 hours and 48 minutes. And the vents still count as being in the kitchen, JARVIS will totally tattle on you if you try to get sneaky."

Tony swept into the kitchen, looking bleary eyed and scruffier than usual, but at least there was a real smile on his face.

"I heard a rumor, and had to come see the Cooking Bros in action," he announced, clapping his hands together. "Look how cute you are, working together! You know, I always say cooking is like science, so if you can science, you can cook."

"Science still isn’t a verb. And before you ask, yes," Bruce pulled the samosas they’d made out of the oven where they were being kept warm, and Tony cheered.

"This is why you're my favorite."

He approached the tray with grabby hands, and Bucky swatted him away. "You'll burn your mouth."

“Don’t tell Bruce, but you’re really my favorite,” he faux whispered, snatching a samosa anyway, taking a big bite. “Ow, hot.”

Bucky shook his head as Tony exhaled around the mouthful of samosa in an attempt to cool it off enough to chew, his face screwed up comically, and whatever irritation Bucky had been holding onto evaporated.

He mussed up Tony's hair, earning himself an outraged, “Hey!” in the process, then took the large dish of curry from Bruce, and headed out, almost running into Steve.

“I’ll take it,” he offered, doing his best not to look at anyone in the room, grabbing it before Bucky could answer.

“What’s up with Cap?” Bucky and Bruce sighed at the same time, and Tony added, “Okay. Did I miss something?”

“Not really,” Bruce answered, leaving with the samosas.

“It’s fine.”

“Right, sure, it’s not suddenly weird in here at all,” Tony narrowed his eyes, but perhaps remembering that he himself had been deflecting on a lot of fronts, changed the subject. “Hey, I was thinking after dinner maybe we could head upstairs. You know, just me, and you, and no one else?”

The odd thing was, Tony actually looked like he expected Bucky to say no. “That sounds great.”
Tony’s eyes lit up, and he sauntered over, settling a hand on Bucky’s hip. “Excellent,” his fingers slid under the shirt, warm, familiar, and welcome. “I miss you, and yes, I realize that’s my own fault, but…”

“I miss you, too,” Bucky cut him off, shivering a bit when Tony’s hand slid up his side, then circled down to rest at the small of his back, pulling him in close.

Tony glanced over his shoulder, and since he didn’t spot anyone, he reached up, curled his hand around the back of Bucky’s neck, and brought their mouths together with a sigh.

Unable to help himself, Bucky wrapped his arms around Tony, and kissed back for a moment before asking, “Isn’t there a no kissing in common areas rule in place now?”

“My kitchen, my rules.” Tony nuzzled against the side of Bucky’s neck, and tightened his grip. “Consult the bylaws if you must, but I’m pretty sure there’s something in there about mandatory make out sessions before dinner.”

Tony kissed him again, this time with a bit more enthusiasm, until someone cleared their throat from behind them. Thankfully, Bruce looked more amused than annoyed. “Our dinner is getting cold,” he pointed out.

“Sorry, sorry, that’s on me, my fault,” Tony backed away, hands in the air, a silly grin plastered across his face. “Let’s eat!”

Bucky smiled as he watched Tony spin on his heels, and head out, hooking an arm around Bruce’s shoulders along the way with a shout of, “Samosas are calling!”

As he followed them in, Bucky thought to himself that it was strange how little, relatively unimportant moments could make you feel like you were falling in love with someone all over again.
Bucky was sound asleep when Tony came into the bedroom, flopped down on the bed (half on top of Bucky), and blurted, “Why don’t you want to cook with me?”

“Wha?”

Bucky propped himself up on his elbows. His hair had flopped over his eyes and he couldn’t make out the time other than determining it began with a three. Tony was a heavy weight on his back, so with a grunt, Bucky rolled himself over so they could face each other.

“You asked everyone else,” Tony said, as Bucky struggled to get his sleep addled brain up to speed.

“You never cook;” Bucky managed around a yawn. He was pretty sure he’d only been asleep an hour.

“Untrue! You’ve just never seen me cook, that doesn’t mean I can’t, or don’t want to,” Tony pointed out, and Bucky was finally awake enough to realize Tony was genuinely upset. “I figured, sure, why not, he’s saving the best for last, any day now he’ll ask, I even dropped hints—did you not get the hints? There were hints, James.”

“I missed the hints, I’m sorry,” Bucky managed to disentangle himself enough to sit upright. Tony was still frowning, which was more obvious once Bucky turned on the bedside lamp. He was all twitchy around the mouth, which was never a good sign. “I didn’t want to make you feel obligated…”

Tony interrupted him, which was such a rare occurrence that Bucky was suddenly wide awake. “Right, so you don’t even ask? I mean, I’ve cooked before, I’m not totally inept. If you don’t believe me, ask Steve, he’s cooked with me. In fact, I taught Steve how to make lasagna, so there!”

Bucky opened his mouth to protest, but snapped it shut at the last moment, because now not only was he seriously worried about Tony, he was also wondering why Steve had felt the need to lie to him about where he’d learned to make lasagna. He swallowed past the pervasive sense of doom, and forced himself to remain calm.

“Antoshka, why are you going out of your way to start an argument with me?”

Now it was Tony’s turn to freeze, and just as Bucky braced himself for some sort of verbal onslaught, or for Tony to up and run, the man just deflated, shoulders slumping as he dropped his head into his hands.

“I am, aren’t I, that’s exactly what I’m doing. Fuck.”

Bucky hesitated, then placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “What the hell is going on?”

“I finished your arm,” Tony blurted. “Want to see?” He looked up, met Bucky’s gaze head on, his eyes seeming to say, “please.”

“Okay.”
The relief was palpable, and so Bucky tried to remain calm as he pulled on his pants from the day before, not bothering with a shirt or socks or anything else, because Tony was already heading for the door.

They said nothing along the way, the quiet hanging between them until they were in the elevator together. Tony grabbed his hand, twined their fingers together, and said, “You don’t have to use it, that’s fine, I just had to make it, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky agreed, although there were a lot of other things he’d preferred to have said or asked.

He tightened his grip on Tony’s hand, and just before the doors opened, used it to pull Tony into a hug. It was a huge relief when Tony hugged him back, letting go of his hand in order to snake his arms around Bucky. It made him want to squeeze Tony even tighter, and so he did, pulling them as close together as possible.

When he let go, he couldn’t help but notice that Tony’s eyes were bright, but he thankfully seemed slightly less freaked out. “Right. Here we go.”

Due to the top (not so) secret nature of the project, Bucky hadn’t been in the workshop in almost two weeks, and wasn’t entirely surprised to find it in a general state of disarray. The bots were in their charging stations, and Bucky wasn’t sure if he was projecting or not when he decided they seemed anxious, and concerned.

Several other projects were in the final stages of prototyping: yet another iteration of Iron Man; what looked to be seriously upgraded gauntlets for Natasha; something he couldn’t make sense of, but suspected was for the Hulk; new armor for Steve; and a collection of new arrow types for Clint.

“You’ve been busy.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. As they approached the center of the room, Bucky spotted a familiar shape on the workbench, although it was obscured by some sort of drop cloth. Tony cracked his knuckles, and spun to face Bucky, one hand hovering over the fabric.

“It’s fine if you hate it. Like I said, you don’t ever need to use it, I just, ah, look. Here’s the thing, I’m going to need to connect it, just once, just to make sure everything is working up to spec, but we can swap it back out immediately after, so keep that in mind.”

Bucky took a deep breath, and was proud at how little of his concern made it into his voice. “Can we swap it now, or do we need to wait for Bruce?”

To Bucky, it almost looked like Tony was blinking back tears. “No, we don’t need to wait,” he said softly, chewing on his lower lip. “You should probably see it first, before deciding.” He glanced at Bucky, then his eyes shifted away as he pulled back the sheet.

The arm looked much like the one he was currently attached to, proportionally speaking. Bucky stepped closer, and ran his fingers over the metallic surface, noting the material was different than his current arm. Most noticeably, the red star was absent, having been replaced with the same design as appeared on Captain America’s shield. This made Bucky smile, despite his concern, especially when he leaned closer and noticed the subtle blue glow coming from beneath the insignia.
“Is there an arc reactor in there?” he asked, sounding amazed even to himself.

Tony cleared his throat. “Maybe. A bit.”

There was definitely something surreal about standing there staring at the arm, especially as he began noticing all the tiny differences, like the alterations made to the fingers; they looked much more in keeping with those of his flesh and blood hand, and closer inspection revealed what looked almost to be fingerprints on each of the pads.

Something was different with the palm of the hand as well. He traced the delicate metallic outline of a closed shutter of sorts, wondering what it was for, even as he refocused his gaze to the graceful curve of muscle, the improved construction around the elbow, and the almost silky smooth flushness of the vents.

“This is beautiful, Antoshka,” he murmured, watching as his breath fogged up the metal.

Tucking his hair behind his ears, he straightened up, not bothering to hide his confusion. Tony was smiling now, looking relieved, and Bucky was still trying to figure out why he’d been so nervous in the first place.

“Yeah, you like it?”

Standing there, hands shoved in his pockets and rocking back and forth on his heels, Tony looked like a little kid, all shy, glowing pride. “I love it,” Bucky insisted, licking his lips. “I’m just trying to figure out what’s been going on with you lately.”

“Ah,” and the happy expression slid off of Tony’s face to be replaced with something more in keeping with his behavior as of late. He gave a little shrug, and Bucky felt his heart begin to race. “It isn’t that big a deal, really.”

“You’ve been locked down here, shutting me out, building upgrades for everyone like…” and he had to stop, because something had just occurred to him, and suddenly he couldn’t breathe, could feel the room tilting off its axis.

Tony pulled a face, and folded his arms across his chest, one hand popping out to gesture around the room theatrically. “Look, I’m not going to be around forever, is all, and, shit. Hey, hey!”

Tony was suddenly right there, his face transformed by concern, and Bucky realized he was halfway to his knees, one hand gripping the workbench, the other holding onto Tony. He let himself sink the rest of the way to the floor, pulled Tony down with him, and struggled to get his mouth to work.

“Are you dying? Is that what’s…”

“Whoa, whoa,” Tony’s eyes widened, and he quickly pulled Bucky into a hug, then grabbed hold of his face and kissed him hard. “No, no one is dying, I’m fine, I’m just, fuck, trying to be proactive or something.”

Bucky couldn’t decide if he wanted to throw up, shake Tony, or kiss him again, so he just let out the sob he’d been holding in, and buried his face in his hands, shaking with adrenaline.

“I’m so sorry,” Tony babbled, stroking Bucky’s hair, and his shoulders. “I’m fine, really, totally healthy, not dying at all. Well, okay, technically we’re all dying, in a sense, but…”
Bucky pulled Tony into a viselike hug, then shoved him away, wiping a hand over his face to get rid of the tears. He shifted around until he was sitting crosslegged, and glared at Tony, heart still hammering wildly against his ribcage. “What, then, why the sudden need to build upgrades for everyone? Why’ve you been so erratic?”

Tony looked appropriately mortified. “I’m sorry, if I thought you’d think…”

“What else am I supposed to think?”

“I wouldn’t tell you like that,” Tony insisted, “and don’t you dare say omelet! I know Pepper told you about that, and it is not fair bringing mistakes from previous relationships into the mix.”

Bucky took a deep breath, exhaled, then took another. It took every last bit of willpower, but he pushed his chaotic feelings aside, steadied his heartbeat, his breathing, and then just looked at Tony. Somehow, the silence worked in ways the questioning hadn’t, because he could see the resignation in Tony’s eyes.

“Fine.” Tony exhaled shakily, and plopped down onto his ass, kicking his legs out in front of him. “So, about two weeks ago, when you were out on that mission with the assassin twins, I might have had, uh, a bit of a… I’d guess you’d call it a meltdown?”

Bucky felt his heart lurch, but forced himself to not react, trying to shelve the strange sense of betrayal welling up inside of him. “What happened?”

“I had one of my totally awesome wormhole nightmares, only this time, dear old dad decided to make an appearance, so there was the added bonus of being told what a colossal disappointment I was.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, and shrugged. “So, when I woke up, I had a few drinks, then panicked, dumped the bottle, found Bruce, and kept him up all night questioning the nature of reality.”

Bucky wanted to ask why Tony hadn’t just told him back when it had happened, but he already knew the answer. It wasn’t that Tony didn’t love or trust him, it was that most of the important people in his life had so thoroughly fucked him over when he needed them the most that it was hard for him to trust his own trust in people.

At least he’d sought out Bruce, and Bucky thought back to their careful conversation, once again concluding that Bruce was a good friend.

“Also, yes, I’m glossing over details here, but I’m not in the right headspace to get into it all. I promise, later we can have all the heartfelts you want, okay? James,” and now he was pleading with his eyes, hoping for forgiveness, but expecting to get the emotional equivalent of a kick in the teeth. “I’m sorry, I fucked up, and then I made it worse, by not saying anything.”

With a sigh, Bucky got to his feet, and grabbed hold of Tony, pulling him upright and into a tight embrace. He rocked him back and forth, and said, “I’m not going anywhere, Antoshka, I love you.”

Even if he’d wanted to yell, or berate Tony for the slip up—which he didn’t—or call him out on the backslide in communication, Bucky was well aware that Tony was his own worst critic. He’d likely spent every waking moment of the last two weeks putting himself
through the grinder, and the last thing Bucky wanted was to do was make him feel worse.

“That’s really good to hear,” Tony murmured, and allowed Bucky to end the hug so that he could cup Tony’s face in his hands, and look him in the eyes. “I kept telling myself that, but, you know. Well Adjusted is not my middle name for a reason.”

“Is this why you made new equipment for everyone?”

Tony’s mouth quirked, and he tilted his head a bit. “Ah, well, actually, I wasn’t kidding about being proactive. The nightmare got me thinking about death, and then I realized everything was still set to go to Pepper, which, sure, she’s still getting something. A lot, really.”

He sighed, pressed his mouth into a thin line, and started again. “Anyway, I changed my will, so when the inevitable happens, you’ll all be taken care of. That’s sort of, uh, important to me, knowing the Avengers will be bankrolled. I also might have made you, Steve, and Pepper the majority shareholders of Stark Industries, so I hope that’s okay.”

Bucky swallowed past the lump in his throat, and tried to ignore the awful dropping out sensation that accompanied the thought of Tony dying. He was still feeling the aftereffects from their previous misunderstanding, and wanted to beg Tony to just stop talking about it already, but that wasn’t fair—he’d lost count of the times Tony had patiently listened to him when he’d needed to talk, and none of those conversations had been pleasant.

“Right, so after that, I got to thinking about,” and here Tony paused again, his voice catching, but he pushed on, the words coming out in a rush, “uh, you, getting injured, or dying, which, yeah, please don’t.” He reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, muttering, “Fuck, right, this is awful, this is the worst conversation ever, why are you still letting me talk?”

“Because you need to,” Bucky answered.

“You’re a horrible, horrible man,” Tony said, quickly adding, “no you’re not, you’re amazing.”

Tony was too brilliant, too charismatic, too perfectly fractured and stitched back together beautifully, and so very Tony, that his absence would be the equivalent of a black hole suddenly appearing in the middle of New York. Bucky couldn’t imagine surviving the gravitational pull of his absence, would much rather let himself be sucked into oblivion, if it came to that.

He figured he should probably say something to that effect. “I can’t stand thinking of a world that doesn’t have you in it.”

Tony actually smiled at this, although it was a bit watery. “Now you know why I wasn’t exactly excited to have this conversation. I’m a fuck up and a bummer. No one should invite me to parties.”

“New rule. You don’t get to call yourself a fuck up anymore,” Bucky said, tilting Tony’s chin up so he could get a better look at his eyes. They were the same eyes he’d seen in pictures of Tony as a child, and (not for the first time) a small, vindictive part of him hated Howard Stark.

“Okay, just a bummer then. Do you really like the arm?”
“I love the arm,” Bucky insisted.

“Good, great. We’re not exactly living the white picket lifestyle here. Any of us could go at any time, and I guess I got this idea in my head, then couldn’t shake it. At least this way, if something happens, between Bruce and JARVIS you don’t have to worry, they could build you a new arm at any time.”

“So, this isn’t an apology arm,” Bucky asked.

“Nope,” Tony worried at his lower lip a bit. “It’s a just in case arm. The apology part was where I said I was sorry. Which I meant, by the way. I just, uh, wanted to finish everything up before we talked about the whole having something to be sorry for situation.”

Which meant what Tony was really saying was he knew himself well enough to predict he’d fall face first back into a bottle if Bucky had decided the slip up was worth ending things over, leaving him in no position to finish the upgrades for the team.

“Apology accepted.”

Bucky exhaled loudly, studying the relief and gratitude visible on Tony’s face. He was pretty sure he should be more upset, or concerned—more something—but instead he was just relieved that Tony wasn’t dying, and that now he (more or less, sans some pertinent details) finally knew what the hell was going.

“Hey, Antoshka,” he said, giving Tony’s shoulder a playful punch, “wanna show me how to cook something?”

“Yes, absolutely, I love you for asking—I mean, I love you for lots of reasons—but, yeah, let’s make something, like right now,” Tony blurted, his entire body seeming to slump with relief, as if it was only just sinking in that nothing awful was going to happen, that he was allowed to make a mistake, and it didn’t need to be the end of the world.

“Alright then,” Bucky tilted his head in the direction of the doors. “What should we make?”

“French Toast, with obscene amounts of butter. Don’t let me have more coffee, though, no matter how much I beg, and I’m definitely going to beg, count on it.”

“I think I can handle it.” Bucky took Tony’s hand on the way to the elevator, and didn’t let go until they were in the kitchen.

“Thanks, by the way.” Tony gave him a look equal parts confusion and wonder, before asking, “You’re really not going anywhere, are you?”

“Nope.” As if to prove his point, Bucky dipped his head enough to brush his lips against Tony's, adding, "I'm right where I want to be," before kissing him.

“Huh.” Tony studied him intensely for a moment, his eyes a bit too bright, and his cheeks suspiciously pink, then ducked his head, and smiled softly. “Good. Excellent, really. Okay, so we need bread, eggs, the whole shebang. Let’s get to work.”

So they did, Tony seemingly needing to invade Bucky’s personal space as much as possible, as if confirming he was still entitled to do so. Bucky didn’t mind, he found he liked cooking that way, with their shoulders touching, or a hand resting against his lower back, Tony even reaching out to tuck his hair behind his ear for him.
When their eyes met, there was something different there, underneath the gratitude, and relief. There might have been a similar look in his own eyes, because his chest almost hurt, filled as it was with love for the man next to him.

Tony might be right about the risks involved in their lifestyle, but wasn’t that just life in a nutshell? Everyone was at risk every day, it was just that most of them didn’t think about it, and as a result, maybe they didn’t cherish what they had quite as much. Bucky wasn’t about to make that mistake; he was going to enjoy every minute he had with Tony.

So, maybe the end result of their French Toast wasn’t the prettiest, but they’d made it together, ate it standing side by side at the kitchen counter. They didn’t say much as they ate, just exchanged the occasional syrupy kiss, content to be there with each other, enjoying the fruits of their labor.

It was, without a doubt, the best breakfast of Bucky’s life.

And if he eventually caved, and let Tony have more coffee, then so be it.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Tony isn't dying! And he finally opened his mouth. And man this thing got long. Hope I didn't bore you all to tears along the way. Whew. Also, yes, we will find out what new features are involved with Bucky's new arm, it just wasn't the right time for Tony to pop it on and show off, if you know what I mean. :)
Chapter Summary

Steve wishes time travel worked, because he has a list, one specific to him and Tony Stark, and it's only getting longer.

The list changes, because sometimes he's convinced the rest of it would be entirely unnecessary if only he could go back and talk to Howard. Or maybe sock him in the jaw.

*Steve, on the outside looking in.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s always been about timing for Steve.

Project Rebirth.

A shot rings out and Erskine falls to the ground.

Peggy Carter.

Bucky Barnes, lost, and found, and lost again.

Bracing for impact, he tries to hold onto the sound of Peggy’s voice, knowing they’ll never have that dance. He thinks of Bucky—more his brother than a friend—of his mom, of his dad, wonders if he’ll see them on the other side. He prays that he’s done enough, hopes that he’s fulfilled his purpose, that HYDRA’s plans have been derailed, and that…

It goes dark.

Waking up in a New York that is not New York, he mourns. He rages. He is so very young, in the grand scheme of things, and yet he feels a thousand years old.

Tony Stark.

His mouth opens, and he hardly recognizes the venom churning in his heart, thinking only of his friends, everyone he loved, his *entire world*, dead and gone and forgotten.

What, exactly, had he fought for? What had they sacrificed everything for? The people he loves are dust, but this man is here, and he doesn’t deserve to be.

Tony Stark answers flippantly, but…

It takes Steve a long time to realize the damage done by those words, much longer than it takes to understand how wrong he was when he said them.
He had a chance to apologize, and did, it was accepted even, brushed aside as unnecessary, but sometimes Steve can still see that flash in Tony’s eyes, and understands that without even trying, he’d slipped a knife in under Tony’s well constructed defenses, and left behind a wound that refused to heal.

Sometimes, he’s glad of it. At least he was able to leave a mark on the man, invisible as it is.

Most of the time, he wants to shake Tony, force him to understand how very good he is, and how very wrong Steve was, but he knows no matter what he did, it wouldn’t work. It’ll always be there, somewhere between them.

In that brilliant mind of Tony’s, there is an echo of Steve’s voice sharing his low opinion of Tony’s worth, demanding to know, “What are you?”

He’s Steve’s best friend.

Tony works so hard, too hard, and never seems to comprehend how much better he’s made the world. He’ll brag about it without believing a single word he says, trying to make you resent him, even as your life is made easier by his creations.

He really is a philanthropist, to an extent Steve suspects no one other than Pepper, Natasha, and himself are aware of. Tony will downplay this, turns it all into a joke, and it isn’t false modesty, nowhere near it.

Get enough scotch into him and Tony will let you know just how little he thinks of his accomplishments, to an extent that it leaves Steve’s chest aching.

He throws his life around as if he is replaceable.

Tony isn’t replaceable. He’s quickly become Steve’s lifeline.

He drinks too much, and doesn’t sleep enough, and is capable of lashing out spectacularly, but only because he’s been hurt so many times. Steve doesn’t want to be on the list of people who has hurt Tony Stark, but he is.

Tony has the best laugh Steve’s ever heard, unless he's laughing at you. When he smiles, his eyes crinkle at the corners, and Steve can’t help but smile back. He pulls light and color out of thin air, and takes every problem as a personal challenge, and he builds them a home. That in and of itself is an amazing accomplishment, but Tony doesn't even let them thank him properly.

Bucky, and Peggy, and Howard, and Erskine; it's like Tony is the best parts of all of them, and Steve doesn't understand how it took him so long to see this.

Until he remembers it's because Tony tries desperately to hide, is an expert at it, really.

It's also because Steve didn't want to see.

Tony asks him to live in the Tower, more than once, but he refuses, and he's not sure why. Maybe because a part of him knew what would happen, even then. Maybe because he’s hanging onto Peggy, even though she forgets and remembers and forgets again; it breaks his heart every single time it happens.

He wants to live there. Bruce has already moved in, and rumor has it Barton could be found there between missions, which meant Natasha was next.
Pepper comes to see him, asks as well, and he makes a joke, not understanding why her face pinches, not realizing that she's already left Tony.

Pepper is how he learns that the entire time he was trying to keep Tony at arms length, the man was working behind the scenes to help him, talked about him almost incessantly, and so of course Pepper thought they were close.

He starts acting like they are.

Now, he wishes time travel worked, because he has a list, one specific to him and Tony Stark, and it's only getting longer.

The list changes, because sometimes he's convinced the rest of it would be entirely unnecessary if only he could go back and talk to Howard. Or maybe sock him in the jaw.

When he does move in, he's worried it's already too late, but somehow, it isn't. He finds himself spending long hours in the workshop. Sketching. Talking. Listening. Watching. Growing up a little. Slowly letting go of the past. Learning to appreciate the future.

Tony is filthy rich, but his fingers are calloused. This says more about him to Steve than anything he’s read in the files, or seen on the news. His eyes remind him of Peggy, and the sass mouth on him reminds Steve of Bucky. He seemingly never stops thinking, and hardly ever shuts up, not until you most need him to talk to you.

Steve finds himself thinking how good it is to have a friend again.

Things are complicated between them, but they didn't need to be. He knows now, he's the reason why; him and his timing and his fear.

Because Tony Stark scares him in all the ways jumping out of a plane without a parachute doesn't. He's larger than life, and beautiful, and so very damaged. He fights like he's got nothing to lose, never stops fighting, and Steve isn't even sure at what point he fell in love with Tony, but he spends a great deal of time trying to convince himself otherwise.

It'd be a bad idea.

Tony wasn't the sort you entrusted with a fragile heart.

He was too reckless, and it was already hard enough for Steve, coping with the losses he’d experienced. Coping with seeing Peggy. He shouldn't—can't—put himself out there for someone so ready to throw everything away.

Too late, he understands that Tony had been looking for a reason to stop, and Steve could have been that reason. He should have, actually, they should have been each other's reason, but he was so busy being scared, and cautious, and practical, and so very unlike himself…

Everyone seems to forget how broken he is. How much he’s had taken from him, what he’s given up, how young he is, how many people he's had to kill, or hurt, and that in his mind, he’s still just a kid from Brooklyn.

He’s Captain America, but he’s also Steve Rogers, and Steve still thinks of himself as that little guy who hated bullies, and wheezed when he ran, the one no one wanted to dance with.

And that Steve tells himself he has no business even thinking about taking on someone like Tony Stark, not romantically. What the hell could he even bring to that equation?
He should have known better; he’s just not sure *how* he was supposed to know, not without having had more time. In hindsight, it’s crystal clear, but…

See, there was a moment. It took him a while, but he’s spent enough time thinking back, agonizing over what he should have done differently, and he’s finally figured out when it was that he’d made the mistake that changed everything.

Another late night in a long string of late nights, and Tony has had enough to drink that he's calm, relaxed. You can almost see that his thoughts have slowed down, and Steve idly wonders if this is a big part of why Tony drinks, just so he'll stop thinking so much.

He isn't drunk, though, just relaxed, and no one else is around, but Tony is still sitting close enough that Steve can feel him breathing. Can feel the heat of his body pressed against his side, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh.

He isn't sure what it is they're watching. He thought it was an old sci-fi movie, but there are people sitting at the bottom of the screen making fun of it, which is odd, and when he turns to ask why he finds Tony watching him, an unguarded expression on his face.

Just like that, Steve's heart is racing, he's all fight or flight, and when Tony touches the side of his face, he flinches, and without thinking he brushes Tony's hand aside. Gently. Really, he hardly touched Tony's hand at all, but it was enough.

Now he understands what it was he saw cascading across Tony’s face—all the shields coming down hard, the soft look in Tony's eyes replaced with something that is now all too familiar; something dark, and always aimed inward. It’s so fast, and the smile that followed was one of his Press Circuit Smiles. But *that* Steve didn’t have enough knowledge of Tony Stark to recognize what was happening.

"Chill, Capsicle," Tony's voice sounds light, easy, and it turns out that was all an act. "You've got something on your face. Guess you're bound to get dirty if you spend time with me."

His smile widens, and he shakes the ice around his empty glass, gets up, pours himself another, but instead of returning to the couch he plops himself down in the chair closest to the bar, his legs hanging over the arm, body relaxed as if everything is right in the world.

When he touches his cheek, Steve’s fingers come away with the tiniest bit of grease on them, and he murmurs his thanks. Tony doesn’t answer him. Steve can feel everywhere Tony's body had made him warm slowly turning cold, the absence of that heat beside him, and he doesn't know what to do or say and so he does nothing.

Tony stays for another half hour before wandering off with talk of bed, and the next day he learns that Tony had to leave town for business, and Steve doesn't see him again for almost a week.

He didn’t understand it was their moment.

The thing is, how was he to know? When Tony returns, they still spend a ridiculous amount of time together. He never turns Steve away—he’ll lock out the others, but never Steve—only he doesn't seek him out quite in the way he did before.

Tony still touches him, but when he looks back, Steve realizes that it stopped happening when they were alone together.

Iron Man and Captain America, Captain America and Iron Man. They fight together, and sometimes they fight each other.
Tony is his best friend, but it isn’t like it was with Bucky.

Not at all.

One afternoon when they’re sparring together, Steve is distracted and annoyed, because Tony smells amazing despite being hot and sweaty, which makes no sense whatsoever. Steve almost complains about it, but finds himself suddenly captivated, watching as several beads of sweat slide wetly down the long column of Tony’s neck, down and down, sliding into the curves and dips of his collarbone.

There is the compulsion to lean forward, to follow the trail in reverse, lap through and across and over, slide his tongue up to trace the muscles of Tony’s neck, to taste him, and Steve is surprised, because he only just manages to stop himself from following through on the impulse.

Tony is smiling at him, and Steve can’t breathe, and he thinks maybe falling in love isn’t something you have any control over. That maybe the idea of loving Tony is so terrifying because it would mean the ice wasn’t an accident. It might mean that he was never supposed to be with Peggy. Maybe everything was leading up to this.

They live together, and fight side by side, and each day Steve feels a little braver. He reaches out where once Tony might have, and thinks they’ll have a moment one of these days, a little window where it’ll feel safe, and right, and so he stops being afraid.

It was already too late, but Steve didn’t know it at the time. The memory of pushing aside Tony’s hand was distant, and they’d made so many other memories since then. Cooking together, countless hours spent at each other’s side, Tony’s arm slung around his shoulders, laughing together, Clint calling them Mom and Dad, and Steve blushing and watching Tony’s reaction out of the corner of his eye.

+Bucky Barnes, found again.

The world is turned upside down. Without ever saying so, Tony has been looking for Bucky for him, has tracked him down, and pulls Steve aside to give him his best friend, his brother, back.

Tony is the reason Steve is able to keep Bucky, when he and the Avengers go to confront the man that was the Winter Soldier. Tony fights dirty and throws his money around without ever telling Steve it's happened, and suddenly what's left of S.H.I.E.L.D. and other interested parties backs off, and Bucky is living in the Tower with them.

It's understandably distracting.

It's hard to look at Bucky without hurting, because he's never felt so grateful, so ashamed, so guilty, so selfish, and happy, and scared. Tony lets him cry, doesn't try to make it all better, just holds him through it all, a warm hand rubbing circles between his shoulder blades.

Trying to explain Tony Stark to Bucky is next to impossible, and Steve does an awful job of it, Bucky losing his patience and cutting through the nervousness with a brusque, “Do you trust him?”

There’s no hesitation when he answers, “Yes.”

If it were really Bucky Barnes standing beside him, he’d probably have told him everything on the spot, asked Bucky’s advice, gotten himself teased before being encouraged to just go for it.
The problem is, this isn’t his best friend. This man is different. Hollowed out. He speaks Russian with what Natasha claims is a flawless accent, as if he’d grown up in Moscow. He looks at Steve like he’s a puzzle to be solved. A piece that doesn’t fit.

He is a stranger wearing the face of Steve’s brother. Steve doesn’t love him any less. He knows Bucky is in there, somewhere, and just wants to help him get better.

“Hello, beautiful!”

And he knows Tony is talking about the arm, is trying to make Bucky comfortable, but Steve’s crawling out of his skin, and sort of wants to throw up.

Bucky laughs, not a real laugh, more of a grunt than anything, but it is the most Bucky response he’s seen from this man so far, and as much as he wants to whoop with delight, he also feels slighted.

Tony calls him James.

Steve doesn’t know why, but it makes him nervous.

They seemingly get along well, though.

Tony somehow knows what to say and do and how to act around Bucky. It makes Steve uncomfortable because it forces him to remember what he's read in Tony’s files, the whitewashed version of what happened in Afghanistan, and all the kidnappings prior to that particular incident.

He wonders about all of the things that never made it into any files, every brick in Tony’s walls, every reason for his trust issues, and aches for both of his friends.

It is surprising, yet somehow feels inevitable; Steve walks into the workshop one evening, and finds Bucky sitting there, not doing anything but staring at the floor. He nods a greeting when he sees Steve, but they don't talk the entire time he's there.

Tony does all the talking for them, while Steve sketches, and Bucky listens to the music, and stares through everything around him. His hair is long, his mouth is tight, jaw stubbled, and his eyes are empty, except when they’re too full. In that regard, he reminds Steve of Tony.

Bucky has ripped one sleeve off of his shirt, so that the metal of his bionic arm is fully visible, while the rest of him remains covered. Steve isn’t sure why, but is convinced this is because of Tony, and that maybe it is a good sign.

Being there with the two of them is uncomfortable and he doesn't know why. He begins asking JARVIS if Bucky is there before going down to the workshop, because it is feeling less and less like he belongs.

More often than not, Bucky is there.

Sometimes Bruce is with them, and Steve joins in. Sometimes Steve goes even when it’ll only be the three of them, but mostly he leaves them alone.

He wants to spend time with Bucky, and he tries and tries, but he finally understands that Bucky needs time, lots of time, and that just by loving him, Steve is hurting him. Tony doesn't love him, and so he is safer to be around.

So Steve gives Bucky his best friend, and spends more time with Sam, Clint, and Natasha, Bruce, and Thor, he takes on more work, and it doesn't help at all, because he misses Tony terribly.
He misses Bucky, too, but he's just grateful that he has the opportunity to get to know the person he is now.

One day he tells him as much, and Bucky hugs him, his face wet against Steve’s neck, the bionic arm holding him almost too tight and all wrong, and he wonders if this is what Bucky felt, waking up to find the new and improved Steve Rogers had arrived to rescue him.

"Let's hear it for Captain America," and he thinks there was something of this James in that Bucky's voice, even back then.

Maybe he'd ignored it. Even before he became the Winter Soldier, the war had changed Bucky in ways it hadn't changed Steve.

Tony seemingly breathes life into Bucky without even trying, just by being himself, and as a result there is a shift in the household. Bucky begins joining the others in little activities, even if he remains quiet most of the time.

Steve is surprised, until he remembers that this is what Tony does; he fixes things.

Slowly but surely, Bucky finds his way, finds his voice, and begins to allow them all to help him. Steve is awed and amazed by the strength of his friend. The strength of both of his friends.

Steve can’t find words for how happy it makes him, being able to sit on the couch with an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, to reach around him to mess up Tony’s hair. It’s natural and easy, and he begins to think it’s all going to work out.

The thing is, Steve realized too late that if things were going to change between him and Tony, he’d have to be the one to make it happen, go in all guns blazing. Just put it out there, show Tony how he feels, show him that he trusts him with his heart.

He starts thinking about this, thinks maybe the next time Tony flips open the Iron Man faceplate to share a stupid joke, and Steve has that urge to kiss him silent, he’ll just follow through.

Maybe it could be that easy.

He strategizes, and waits, and Bucky is smiling more, and making jokes again, and spending more time with Steve, and he knows he has Tony to thank for this.

Tony is different, too. He’s less moody, focused again in a way he wasn’t before. He's better about following orders, taking less risks when they're in the field, and Steve rejoices in this, because he still has nightmares where the wormhole closes with Tony on the wrong side.

Each day that passes he thinks will be the day, but it isn’t easy getting Tony to himself.

And then Tony flies into a building, and it hardly registers, because Steve can’t hear anything over the sound of his own heart hammering in his ears until someone that sounds just like Captain America says, “Hawkeye, cut the chatter on the comms!”

He works on autopilot, and somewhere in his mind he is reminded of going through the motions after watching Bucky slip through his fingers, and even though he wants to cry, or scream, wants to throw up, or destroy something beautiful, he is still Captain America, and so he gets the job done.

No one dares follow them as he storms after Tony, and he doesn’t want them to be fighting, he wants this to be their moment, right here. With Tony babbling on, color high in his cheeks, looking like he wants to get back in the armor.
Steve wants to pull them together, to slide his tongue into Tony’s mouth and kiss him quiet. Wants to hold him, and taste him, steal the air from his lungs.

He desperately wants to tell Tony Stark that he’s fallen in love with him.

If it was anybody else, he could be selfish.

He would be, too. He’d follow through, and order Tony to forget them, and it isn’t ego that tells him that Tony would comply, it’s just the truth.

But this isn’t anyone, it isn’t some stranger, it’s Bucky.

Still, he opens his mouth to make his confession anyway, but then stops when he actually hears what it is Tony has been saying.

He’s giving up drinking.

He’s saying horrible things about himself, while simultaneously begging Steve to tell him he’s wrong to have said them, that he’s not going to fuck things up this time, is desperate for Steve’s approval.

Finally, he says, “I’m not good enough for your best friend, is that it?”

His eyes are saying, “I wasn’t good enough for you,” and Steve doesn’t understand why until later, when he remembers brushing aside Tony’s hand.

Then it starts to make sense, because he somehow managed to underestimate Tony’s ability to hate himself. He finally sees that, out of self preservation, Tony had needed to retreat behind his walls, had written them off for good based on the tiniest of rejections, all while Steve was finally getting his act together and beginning to open up.

Tony had been as scared of Steve as Steve had been of him, maybe more so, but he’d tried anyway.

He’d reached out and Steve had unintentionally pushed him away.

He was reaching out again, but it wasn’t Steve he was asking for this time, just his blessing.

And because he loved him, loved both of them, Steve gave Tony his brother.

“Tony. No, of course not,” he says, and squeezes Tony’s shoulder. “Anyone with half a brain could see how good you’ve been for Bucky.” He touches the side of Tony’s face, and lies to him by telling him the truth. “I was just… Well, feeling a little left out, honestly.”

When he tells Tony that he’s his best friend, Tony looks so happy, so surprised, that Steve wants to cry. How could Tony not know? The only possible answer was that Steve had failed to show him.

Later, when he’s alone, he does cry, and there is no one to hold him this time, because the only people he’d comfortably turn to in the moment are with each other.

He’s had it backwards the entire time, because Tony was precisely the person you trusted with a fragile heart—his own had been broken so many times, he knew exactly how to put them back together.

He could have talked to Tony, admitted he was scared, asked him for time to figure them out, and Tony would have happily given him all the time in the world. Instead, he’d managed to push him away.
It's always been about timing for Steve.

He wishes he could go back to the beginning, and be braver the second time around.

It doesn’t hurt nearly as much as he expects, seeing them together. Not at first, anyway.

Apparently, the Tony and Bucky thing has been happening in slow motion around him, and he’s the only one in the household to have missed the signs, wrapped up as he was in his own feelings.

Oddly, it is almost like nothing changes. There aren’t any drastic, outward signs of their entanglement, and he relaxes. They’re happier, though, he can see that, and it’s good, they should be happy. He wants them to be happy.

The three of them spend more time together, and the new normal isn’t so bad, really. He tries to keep his thoughts under check, he makes a conscious effort to give them space when they need it, is careful to keep his touches innocent and evenly distributed between the two of them.

Steve thinks he’s got it figured out, a sort of balancing act, and things aren’t great, but they’re good, and his friends are happy.

He tells himself it isn’t forever, but doesn’t examine what he means by this, just holds it in his heart.

Then there is an afternoon.

Clint is in an especially good mood, and as a result they’re playing Gin Rummy together of all things, when Bucky walks into the room barefoot, wearing an Iron Maiden t-shirt and a beat up pair of jeans, looking relaxed, as well as decidedly different in a way Steve can’t identify.

Clint, without even looking up from his cards, holds his hand up in a high five gesture, and Bucky doesn’t leave him hanging as he heads into the kitchen. The sounds of their palms connecting is loud, and jarring.

“Glad somebody in this place is gettin’ laid,” Clint says, still staring at his cards.

The bottom drops out, and it’s only because Steve’s gone numb that he doesn’t crush the cards he’s holding, or flip over the table, or deck Clint. He’s too busy trying to remember how to breathe, and desperately trying not to cry.

When Bucky walks back into the room, Steve hates him. Only for the space of several heartbeats, but it still happens, and it makes him sick, the jealousy finally getting the best of him.

He has never been more grateful for a call from Phil Coulson, because then he doesn’t need to excuse himself to run to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey in order to scream until he can’t feel anything anymore. He can take it out on an opponent, instead.

Tony is in rare form, more playful in battle than he has been in ages, trading banter with Clint on the comms, and Steve doesn't trust himself to tell them to can it. Not knowing as he does the reason for Tony’s good mood. He's worried something unspeakably, embarrassingly inappropriate would come out instead.

Truthfully, he's more upset with himself than with them. They're supposed to be intimate with each other—it's only natural. He was the one foolish enough to pretend it would never happen.
By the time they come home, he’s calmer, and ready to admit that he’s been deluding himself. He isn’t sure why, precisely, or how, but he’d come to the conclusion that after some time, Tony and Bucky would find themselves parting ways, deciding they were more comfortable as friends, like Clint and Natasha.

He’d been convinced he’d have another chance with Tony, because… Well. Because the alternative was awful.

It’s much more difficult, now that he’s actually paying better attention, now that he sees the way they look at each other, the tiny, intimate gestures and touches and words they exchange.

There is a turning point. Maybe a breakthrough is a better way to think of it. Steve finds himself with an armful of Bucky, holds him for hours, even as he sleeps, he and Clint keeping watch while waiting for Tony to get back to the Tower.

He wants to stay, to help, but he knows it isn’t his place. Tony will take all the pieces of Bucky that have broken apart, and find a new way to put them back together. Steve knows he’ll be stronger as a result, but it’s still hard, leaving them to each other in that moment.

As the elevator doors slide closed, the forced calm slides off of Tony’s face for a moment, and Steve sees how worried Tony is, how much he cares.

It doesn’t hurt as much to see it as it has in the past, and he thinks that is a good sign.

He might not be able to help in the way Tony does, but he understands enough to know it's time to start working towards officially folding Bucky into the team.

They begin sparring regularly, and it's absolutely surreal.

Steve knows for a fact that Bucky hasn’t been in a fight since moving into the Tower, has hardly done anything by way of physical training, but you wouldn’t know it going toe to toe with him.

There is hardly a pause, and Bucky is on him, relentless, efficient, and Steve has no choice but to cast aside his plans of taking it easy on the man. He finds himself wishing he had the shield, but then hardly has time to wish anything at all, because he’s simply trying to cope with this odd blend of Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes that he finds himself sparring with.

He waits for panic, or apologies when Bucky manages to floor him within the first two minutes, but he does neither. He smirks, teases, helps Steve get back up, and Steve knows that everything is going to be okay.

Bucky is going to be okay, which means he’s going to be okay.

The part of him that had been tense since he first saw Bucky's face again relaxes, and he feels lighter, and happier than he has in ages.

By the time it’s Steve’s turn to help Bucky up off the mats, they’re laughing too hard to fight properly, and things quickly spiral out of control, until they’re trading playful slaps, going after each other’s ticklish spots, everything degrading into an homage to The Three Stooges.

Clint walks in to find them tangled up on the floor together, giving each other noogies, elbow jabs, exchanging harmless insults, and says, “Weirdos.”
They exchange a look, and as a team go after Clint, dragging him into the mix with them, and things only get more ridiculous from there.

When Bucky gets a haircut, it just adds to the surreality. Coupled with the change in his demeanor, it's easy for Steve to forget this isn't exactly the same person he grew up with.

Sometimes, without meaning to, he mentions something from their past, something Bucky doesn't remember. Bucky doesn't seem to mind now, he actually looks excited, and will encourage Steve to tell him the story. He'll laugh, and smile, and Steve loves having him there so much.

Loves him so much.

It makes him wish there was a switch he could flip, one that would turn off his physical attraction to Tony, because he feels incredibly guilty lusting after his brother’s partner.

With difficulty, he throws out all but two of the sketches he’s drawn of Tony. Those he keeps are innocent enough, and remain behind with the other drawings of his family, of Clint, Natasha, Thor, Bruce, Hulk, Sam, and Bucky.

He tries desperately to not think of the two of them in bed together, and for the most part, it works. Sometimes, though, he has no choice; there is an afternoon where Tony’s tank top shifts as he’s working on the armor, and since Steve is standing behind him, he unintentionally catches sight of the lovebite nestled between Tony’s shoulder blades.

Steve doesn’t sleep that night.

Thankfully, Tony and Bucky are usually considerate about things like open displays of affection, which he appreciates, but the longer they’re together, the more the little private moments spill over into “public” places.

It’s only because they’re comfortable with each other, with their friends, and technically the entire Tower is home for all of them, but…

Seeing them kiss is still a bit like a knife in the chest, only worse, because it’s arousing, and haunting, and makes it impossible for Steve to deny how good they look together, like he’d had it all wrong this entire time.

Maybe he was never meant to be with Tony at all.

He wishes his heart would get onboard with this notion, but it still clenches painfully when Tony smiles. He still finds himself wanting to slide his hands under Tony’s shirt, to feel his skin, wants desperately to kiss him.

It wouldn’t be as bad as all that, except he knows for a fact that Bucky really and truly loves Tony. This isn’t a temporary thing, some passing fancy. He isn’t going to break Tony’s heart, or take him for granted.

It’s the end of the line all over again.

Sometimes, knowing this makes it easier. Other times, not so much.

So he does his best, when he has these thoughts, to remind himself that Tony is Bucky’s. Tries to refocus his lust into friendship, and support. It doesn’t always work.

Turns out falling out of love with Tony is much harder than falling in was.
Time passes, Bucky becomes an Avenger, and Steve fills his time with the team, and making sure they all work well together, not wanting any of his people—his family—to be hurt.

These days when Clint jokingly calls him Dad, it isn’t so much a joke; he really feels like he’s responsible for all of them, like a father.

He wouldn’t have it any other way.

Tony, as always, is the exception, though. Still the Mom to his Dad, the one person Steve can’t treat like just another teammate; he’s the other half of the Avengers, he’s the person Steve is counting on to take over if anything ever happens to him.

He hasn’t told Tony, but there is a letter he’ll receive, if that happens.

Inside, he explains how he needs Tony to be strong, to pick up the pieces, take care of their family, take care of Bucky. How he’s counting on Bucky to take up the shield, carry on the legacy of Captain America.

Inside, he lets Tony know how important his friendship has been, how proud he is of him, and signs it, “Love, Steve.”

For no reason whatsoever, writing that letter makes him feel better. About everything.

When something happens that sends Tony into lockdown mode, Steve finds his hard won peace of mind crumbling. Tony refuses to talk about what’s bothering him, and each day Steve grows more anxious. He wishes Bucky would do something about it already, drag the man out of his workshop, get him to open up.

"There's helping and there's forcing, Steve. He asked for time, so I’m giving him time."

And just like that it occurs to Steve that by now, Bucky knows Tony better than he does. Knows him intimately, knows him in ways that Steve never will. And this knowledge, this experience, all the shared moments they’ve had, the memories they’ve made, also means that Bucky's love for Tony is in some ways naturally richer. It means the inverse is true, as well. Tony knows and loves Bucky—James—in a way that Steve doesn’t. Can’t.

This realization is so sobering, that he can’t even feel jealous. He just feels stupid. Of course. That’s how it’s supposed to work, isn’t it?

Bucky is looking at him, and when Steve apologizes, he means it. Means it for so many different reasons.

That bit of perspective shakes him awake.

He realizes he doesn’t need to stop loving Tony; that would be impossible. He just needs to move on. And so he starts, a little at a time. It isn’t easy, or painless, but it is necessary, and he finds himself happier as a result.

He stops focusing on what he’s lost, on what could have been, and reflects upon what he has, and what the future might hold for him.
Bucky puts Tony back together for a change, and seeing the difference, the confidence in Tony is eye opening. It’s a gift.

He’s surprised yet again when Bucky comes to show him the new arm. The red star has been replaced with Captain America’s insignia, and Steve finds himself crying. He thinks of the letter he wrote, and wonders if Tony has one of his own stashed away somewhere, asking Steve to take care of Bucky if something happens to him.

Wonders if it’s signed, “Love, Tony.”

Bucky is understandably confused, until he realizes how happy Steve is, and then the two of them are laughing together again, Bucky showing off the bells and whistles of his new appendage.

Steve is physically incapable of keeping a smile off of his face every time he sees the symbol there on the new arm, recognizing it for what it is; a proud proclamation of his importance to these two men.

The next time they’re all together, Steve sketches Bucky and Tony sitting together on the couch. Tony’s fingers are carding through Bucky’s hair, which is being grown out again, and as a result he looks like he’s somewhere halfway between Bucky Barnes and the Winter Soldier. Tony looks bright, and rested, and content in a way Steve has never seen before.

Between them, you can see the insignia on Bucky’s arm.

It’s one of Steve’s favorite sketches.

He has JARVIS scan a copy, sends it to Tony. Bucky finds him an hour or so later, and pulls him into a hug, presses a warm kiss to Steve's temple. The next time he’s in the workshop, he sees it framed, hanging on the wall, and Tony beams at him.

He finds he likes seeing it there.

Steve has so much to be thankful for, and appreciative of, and even if he doesn’t get to share it with Tony in the way he’d hoped, he still gets to be his best friend.

He still has his brother back.

He has a team—a family—again, and he loves them all so much.

They love him, too.

He's a kid from Brooklyn; he figures he’s pretty much got the world.

+  

“You can never tell them,” Bruce says one day, and because it is Bruce, it’s easier to hear. “Either of them.”

Steve sighs, long and loud, but doesn’t stop watching them. They’re out on the landing pad for reasons he can’t comprehend, and they’re not even kissing, not even touching, but they don’t need to be. He can see from here how in love they are.

“I know.”

“You can tell me, though. Is it Bucky, or Tony? Both?”
Steve hangs his head, smiling to himself because it’s better than crying, arms folded across his chest. He takes a deep breath, turns to face Bruce, and finally gets to say it. Not to the man he wanted to tell, but at least he gets to say it.

“I’m in love with Tony.” Bruce nods, and Steve understands he’d already known the answer when he asked the question. “And I can never tell him.”

“No, you can’t,” Bruce agrees, his hand warm against Steve’s back.

Steve turns so he can watch them again, laughing despite himself because Bucky has Tony in a headlock, and Tony is tickling him in an attempt to get free. Once upon a time, seeing them together would have felt like his heart had been twisted round the wrong way in his chest. But it doesn’t feel that way now. It’s a dull ache, not so bad, really.

“No, I can’t,” he says, and when he exhales, he feels even lighter. His smile reaches his eyes. “Those two idiots are really good for each other.”

“Strange, but true,” Bruce’s voice is affectionate. “I’m sorry, by the way.”

The oddest thing is, Steve isn’t. Not in the least. “No, it’s okay, don’t be”

“Look at them,” he says. “When we brought him back here, I never thought I’d see Bucky smile again, let alone laugh like that.”

The next bit is harder to admit, but it’s true, so he says it anyway. “I don’t think I could have made Tony as happy.” Bruce looks surprised, so Steve adds, “Howard,” and somehow that’s enough, explains everything.

Outside, Bucky concedes defeat, and lets Tony escape from the headlock, which results in him raising his arms in the air victoriously, letting out a whoop they can hear from inside.

“Well, if you ever need to talk,” Bruce offers, because Tony and Bucky are slowly making their way over, punching each other playfully along the way.

Steve is still smiling, he can’t help it, really.

As they approach, Tony and Bucky see him through the glass, and their smiles grow wider, each of them waving. Steve waves back, and thinks again of how lucky he is to have them in his life.

“I really appreciate that, Bruce,” he says, “but I'm going to be okay.”

And the best part is, it’s the truth.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who wondered what was going on with Steve during Pledging My Time, or the argument from Mature Adults Conversing, here is your answer!

Steve, I LOVE YOU, you're such a good guy, I'm sorry you have these feelings, but this is my universe, and I am a cruel and fickle god. Tony must be with Bucky, so say all the voices in my head.
I'll make Steve all better, later on, don't you worry... We'll find someone to love him back. Meanwhile, I recommend listening to this.
When he opened his eyes, the room was still lit only by the arc reactor, still filled with the soft sounds of James’s breathing, the familiar weight of his hand resting atop Tony’s stomach. Everything was as it should be, except for the fact that it wasn’t.

Something was missing, but not missed—the suffocating, churning ball of doubt, and self loathing, failure, worthlessness, fear, urgency and doom had been extracted.

He hadn’t been left empty, though. On the contrary, he was packed to the gills with wonder, gratitude, relief, happiness, but most of all love. And adoration. And even more love.

Really, it was crazy, he felt crazy, he felt like he’d been given some sort of spiritual enema, which yeah, gross, not the best mental imagery there, but still. Not far from the mark.

Carefully, he shifted enough so that he could see James, but not so much that his hand would be dislodged. Tony liked feeling the weight of it there, liked knowing that his body heat had warmed the metal.

In the semi-darkness, Tony watched the steady rise and fall of his chest, the way the blue light played with James’s features, the curves of his lightly stubbled cheekbones, the lines of his jaw.

Without realizing it, he found himself grinning wildly, his heart pounding away, feeling like he’d just saved the world (again) because James loved him. Which, yes, admittedly he’d been saying that for awhile, and it wasn’t like Tony hadn’t believed him when he said it, it was just different now.

Okay, ‘believed’ might be an exaggeration; he’d allowed himself to believe that James had believed what he was saying, which was different. Really, importantly, crucially different. It was like believing until. Until something happened (it would be Tony’s fault, whatever this something was) to open his eyes, to make James realize his mistake, and then that would be that. The little cracks in James’s love would become bigger and bigger over time, until the whole thing lost structural integrity, and came crashing down around Tony’s head.

Now that he was thinking about it, this so called ‘belief’ was the closest he’d ever allowed another person to his heart throughout his entire adult life, and usually people never even made it that far.

It was kind of sad, really, but when most of the people you met were only fucking with you to begin with, playing a high stakes version of pretend just to get something out of you, until started to seem pretty good. Good enough, anyway. He’d convinced himself it was as good as he was ever going to get.

You love me until… We’re friends until…

Until James, apparently.

Because, against all odds, miracle of miracles, James Buchanan Barnes actually, literally, legitimately, wholeheartedly loved him. Full stop. No ifs, ands, buts, or untils, none of it. Just full on loved him, unapologetically, and with great enthusiasm, and for the first time in possibly his entire life, Tony had let go of his baggage—okay, more accurately he had traded in the complete set for a simple carry on, and stowed it properly in the overhead compartment—and just let himself be loved.
Let himself feel worthy of being loved.

Oddly enough, the world hadn’t ended. In fact, he felt *amazing*, which was sort of crazy in and of itself considering he’d spent the better part of the previous day crying in James’s arms. Now, he was trying to figure out why he’d waited so long. It wasn’t like he’d expected James to judge him, or leave him, not after their last Serious Conversation.

Maybe he’d waited simply because he’d been enjoying feeling good again, was busy enjoying Bruce’s, "I told you so," looks the day after The French Toast Breakfast, which, yes, was now marked as an official day of celebration in his books. He had all sorts of feelings about egg soaked bread that he’d never had before, because that was how his life worked, apparently.

Yeah, so Tony had been all wrapped up in enjoying the relief of having his little sobriety hiccup out in the open, reveling in his happiness over James’s steadfastness, and watching James show off the new arm. It wasn’t like he hadn’t earned a little respite from bullshit, so back-burning all of the underlying issues had seemed like a perfectly reasonable approach.

Of course, days had turned into weeks, and they still hadn’t talked about his dream, thanks to his fancy evasive maneuvers. Time did its thing, and then he was getting notifications about upcoming rehearsals, and being asked about the bachelor party, which led to remembering he was stepping in for Pepper’s father, giving her away at the wedding.

Suddenly, a simple debate over the catering (*he still felt strongly that no one should be eating anything out of a fucking cucumber cup, thank you very much*) had resulted in him threatening to jump out of the window of his office unless Pepper backed down.

Even though he’d had no intention of actually following through on the threat, *something* about the exchange had prompted Pepper to call in the calvary. Okay, in all fairness, he had been shouting, and sure, he’d started sweating profusely, and his hands had been shaking, and by the time James arrived he’d been sitting *under* his desk, but other than all of that, it had been a fairly typical day.

Thankfully, James had managed to defuse the situation just by being there. The calm had lasted about as long as it took them to get back to their suite, but once they were behind closed doors together, Tony had given up and just started puking emotions everywhere.

Big surprise, almost all of them involved his father.

They’d spent the rest of the day talking, James finally getting all the gory details of his nightmare, which turned into sharing certain details of his childhood he’d never told *anyone* about, like the first time he’d ever tasted alcohol.

He’d shared all of his feelings about falling off the wagon, and how much he never wanted it to happen again, how terrifyingly difficult it was sometimes (*for both of them, turns out*) to go into a battle scenario with the person he loved.

The whole scene had been Messy with a capital M, but cathartic in a way he hadn’t been prepared for. It wasn’t like that was the first time he’d cried in someone’s arms (*Pepper, Rhodey, and especially Bruce came to mind*), but it was the first time he’d done it *sober* since he’d been shipped off to boarding school at the tender age of seven. Apparently, sobriety made a big difference.

Now he was wishing he’d done it ages ago, because he felt like he’d gotten some sort of amazing upgrade overnight. Whatever iteration of Tony Stark he was now, he liked it very much.

“I can hear you thinking.”
"I'd apologize, except they're mostly good thoughts. Honestly, you'd want me thinking these thoughts."

James opened his eyes, and there it was. That look, the look that made Tony feel like he should be writing in his diary like a lovesick teenager. Those blue eyes had been sucker punching him for what felt like forever, and he had a feeling that wasn't going to change any time soon.

"Yeah?" The corner of James's mouth was lifted in a smile, and Tony gave in to his urge to touch, brushed the hair back from his cheek, tuck it behind his ear. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Tony screwed his face up in thought. "It's complicated? I'm not sure the way I feel can actually be summed up with mere words. It's probably best expressed through interpretive dance, but since I don't feel like getting out of bed, I'll just do the next best thing."

With this, Tony took a deep breath, and sighed contentedly, dreamily, fluttering his eyelashes at James while tucking his hands beneath his chin. James did his best to keep a straight face, but it was all there in the eyes. Happiness, specifically happiness that Tony had put there.

"So, better then."

James got a good grip on him, then pulled him in tight, turning him along the way so that he could curl around Tony's back. It was worth mentioning that because of James, Tony now had a deep appreciation for being the little spoon.

"Wow, the entirety of my groundbreaking emotional state reduced to 'better'," but he was failing terribly at mustering even fake irritation. "It loses something in translation, I gotta say."

James made a sleepy noise of agreement at this, face pressed against the back of Tony's neck. "Before your thinking woke me up, I was having the best dream," he murmured, shifting again so that Tony was tucked against him even more snugly.

"Yeah? Was I there?"

"Mm hmm," and Tony shivered, the vibration of James's voice, and warm exhalation of breath between his shoulder blades giving him the best sort of chills. "We'd quit the Avengers," James continued, "and were living on an island."

Tony felt his smile grow even wider, as he realized James wasn't half as sleepy as he sounded, and was in fact full of shit about this whole dream thing. "Interesting."

"You wouldn't let me wear any clothes," James added, digging his chin right into the ticklish spot between Tony's shoulder blades. "You had a white labcoat, a clipboard, and we were working through some sort of list."

Tony gave up and laughed, squirming as James continued with the chin torment, "You remembered," he finally managed, sounding a little awed. The stupid grin was definitely still on his face. "I actually have some islands picked out, I'll have you know."

"Of course you do," James pressed a kiss against Tony's shoulder, "and how could I forget Sexperiment Island? It's all you talked about for a week."

"Yeah, well, that was a while ago."

He didn't bother adding that most people filtered out his babble, wouldn't have remembered something so silly, and insignificant (except it wasn't, it'd been their first afterglow conversation,
which made it important anyway, because James wasn't most people.

James was his, and loved him. Ha, take that, universe!

"I think you should know—the way I’m feeling right now—if it was within my power to do so, I’d have all of your babies. As many as you wanted. We could give them names that rhyme. I’d change my name for you, even. Anthony Edward Barnes, what do you think?"

James laughed, warm and low and all against Tony’s back. "I’m good on babies, thanks. Anyway, the name of the company would have to change," he pointed out, tapping against the reactor, "think of the paperwork. Pepper would kill you."

"Good point."

"James Buchanan Stark," James said, his lips brushing against Tony's skin, and it was odd how hearing it made Tony’s insides feel like they were doing backflips. "Hey, do I even have a social security number anymore?"

"Dunno, I'll look into it."

James made another of those sleepy noises that Tony classified as adorable before rolling himself out of their bed. Tony watched him make his way across the room, lamenting the compromised view. Most mornings he was treated to James strutting around the place naked, but they’d managed to fall asleep half dressed the night before.

Feeling a bit like an overeager puppy, Tony scrambled out of the bed, rushing to catch up, but slowing at the last moment so he could saunter into the bathroom. James was yawning, and taking a piss, and entirely unphased by Tony’s arrival, because that was just how mornings worked with them.

“All you,” he said as he finished, and headed for the sink to wash up.

Tony hummed The Clash’s “I’m Not Down” under his breath while he took his turn emptying his bladder, watching James through his peripheral vision. There he was, squeezing toothpaste out onto his toothbrush, humming right along with Tony, probably without even realizing he was doing it.

Maybe it was because of their conversation, or maybe it was simply one of those moments, but just like that, Tony had an epiphany, a really good one, the best one ever.

“Holy shit, we’re married.”

And sure, maybe technically they weren’t married, had never even had a conversation about marriage before, but what Tony had realized was that in all the ways that counted, the ones that really, truly mattered, they’d been married to each other for a while now.

Thankfully his words were drowned out by the sound of the toilet flushing and James’s enthusiastic toothbrushing. Proposing (announcing?) marriage while taking a piss? He’d never live it down, James would be teasing him for the rest of their lives.

“Hey, you know, with everything going on, I sort of assumed, and, ah, never actually asked.”

James arched an eyebrow, then spat a mouthful of toothpaste into the sink, and Tony grinned, while his heart did that little tugging thing, because wow was he in love.

"Asked?" James prompted, grinning right back, and Tony had a moment of panic until he
remembered he'd been in the middle of talking (not proposing marriage) and had stopped in order to swoon over toothpastey spit of all things.

"Oh, right, wanna be my date to Pepper's wedding?"

"Clint will be disappointed, but sure, I'll go with you instead." He stepped aside so Tony could have the sink, leaning back against the counter. "Do I have to wear a bow tie?"

"Nope, only I get to wear one, because I'm special."

"Ain't that the truth," James looked him up and down like he was an all you could eat buffet.

"Probably worth mentioning the press will show up," Tony said around his own toothbrush. "Are you okay with, you know, this going a bit more public?"

"Sure," James answered with a shrug. "I'm not exactly top secret anymore. Are you okay with it?"

Which really equated to asking if Tony was ready to deal with the possible dip in the company’s stock prices, or the Board giving him shit, and all of the rest of the associated potential PR fallout involved.

"Fuck 'em they'll either get over it, or they won't," and he was proud that he managed to avoid swallowing any toothpaste while saying it. "They might as well get used to it now."

James smiled slyly at this, sidling up so he could hug Tony from behind while he finished brushing his teeth. "Should we give Coulson a heads up?"

"Nah, it'll be more fun for him if we don't."

James chuckled. "You have been remarkably well behaved in public lately. Clint said Phil’s been waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Tony spat, rinsed his mouth out, and hardly had time to put the toothbrush back before James had him spun around, and was kissing him.

He'd always been a big fan of kissing, no doubt about it, had no idea how many mouths had been pressed against his own over the years, but none of them had anything on James. He had a whole kissing repertoire, and Tony loved the entire breadth of his work. It was almost as if James’s mouth had been engineered to drive him crazy, the perfect balance of curve to his upper lip, and pout (depending upon his mood) to the lower.

James had opted for the slow, soft, teasing approach this morning, pulling away when Tony tried to involve a bit more tongue.

"Got anywhere to be?"

"Back in bed with you?" Tony suggested, liking the little growl this got out of James.

Thinking it was a safe bet James was interested, Tony tried to start up with the kissing again, but instead found a cool, bionic hand planted firmly over his mouth. James was doing that precious looking at the ceiling thing, which meant he was about to talk to JARVIS.

“Hey, JARVIS, anything on the books for this morning?”

Tony made a noise of indignation and protest and generally tried his best to look put upon, while JARVIS answered, “You’ll be happy to know Ms. Potts has cleared sir’s schedule for the day.”
“Thanks, J.”

“I feel like I should be offended,” Tony complained once the hand was removed.

“Once bitten, twice shy,” James said, looking completely unapologetic, and mildly amused. “Last time I took your word on that, we were interrupted by an outraged redhead who threatened to end me with her shoe.”

“Oh yeah.”

Tony had forgotten all about that incredibly frustrating, slightly embarrassing, and oddly sort of awesome morning, which had involved numerous death threats being issued, if he was recalling correctly. He’d seen James dispatch HYDRA agents without so much as blinking an eye, but apparently Pepper Potts was a different sort of threat altogether.

He’d hardly had time to get his shoes (or his pants) on before Pep was dragging him off, and James hadn’t even attempted a kiss goodbye for fear of having his arm ripped off and used against him as a weapon.

Pepper had been entirely unsympathetic, and only let him out of her clutches once they were on the plane, and in the air. Of course, Tony had immediately snuck off to the bathroom with his phone in order to frantically jerk off while James talked dirty to him in Russian, which, while not ideal, had actually turned out to be extremely hot.

Unfortunately, it’d been much less fun for James, since he was stuck in a car with Steve and Sam by the time Tony had been able to call, and had to keep them in the dark while it was happening.

For Tony, that had only added to the naughty factor, so that by the end of the conversation it was mostly him rambling on about all the filthy things he was going to do to James as soon as they were in the same building again, while James struggled to keep his voice calm, and casual as he encouraged Tony on towards orgasm.

Tony had made it up to him as soon as possible, with a video feed and everything, and then several times over once he was home again, but James clearly wasn’t interested in a repeat performance of that particular morning.

“Hey, I keep things interesting, what can I say?”

“Something about the bed, I think?” and James took him by the hand, dragging him out of the bathroom.

They tumbled into the bed together, JARVIS having already raised the level of lighting in the room enough for them to be able to comfortably see (ogle) each other. Tony didn’t have time to thank him, though, because he immediately had James’s mouth to contend with.

Sighing contentedly again, Tony found James on top of him, which he was enjoying very, very much. It meant being able to squirm (struggle) just that little bit under (against) the weight of him, meant he could wrap his arms around the man, sink against the pillows, and let himself be kissed into oblivion.

Tony was neither ashamed by, nor proud of his sexual history. He liked sex, had liked it from the first time he’d begun experimenting, liked it lots of different ways, with different types of people, sometimes even with two people at once, and didn’t feel like there was anything wrong with that.

Aside from a handful of encounters back before he was sixteen, he’d always used protection (until
James), got tested regularly, always made sure the person in question was old enough to ride the ride, and had done his level best to make certain whoever he was with had as much fun as he did.

Sure, he might not have always remembered their names (or ever bothered to find out to begin with), and might have inadvertently hurt some people’s feelings, or found himself featured prominently on a sex tape or two (or more) over the years, but whatever, it was what it was, and for the most part it had been fun.

Be that as it may, deep down inside he was a commitment guy at heart, always had been. Monogamy had never been as big an issue for him as emotional trust and intimacy. When you thought of yourself as unlovable it was pretty easy to sabotage your relationships, as he’d learned time and time again.

The point was, he'd been fairly confident that he'd had some truly amazing sex during his lifetime. Of course, as had happened with just about everything since James had come along, he'd had to reclassify and reevaluate what he considered to be true.

He’d understood how love worked until... Thought he had a handle on sex until...

Until James, apparently. Again.

Even from the very first time they’d had sex, James had completely, without a doubt, blown all of his previous experiences out of the water. The strange mix of confidence, insecurity, and openness about what he wanted, and how much he wanted it (specifically from Tony, and no one else) had been intoxicating.

It was, in fact, so alarmingly and unbelievably brilliant that he'd have been willing to put money on it being a fluke. And, of course, James had immediately proven him wrong, because the next time was just as mind blowing, and had left him just as in awe of how in sync they were.

He’d actually spent a good bit of time after that initial experience trying to figure out how the hell a defrosted, time displaced, brainwashed, fellow PTSD sufferer had managed to completely redefine sexual (and emotional) pleasure for him.

It was almost embarrassing, really, because the answer was sort of obvious once he found himself admitting how head over heels in love with the guy he was. Go figure, sobriety, love, acceptance, and trust apparently went a long way for a good sex life with a partner.

It didn't hurt that James was beautiful (on so many levels), and needed Tony in ways no one else had before (which, oddly enough, was something he hadn't realized he'd needed so badly), and was enthusiastic, adventurous, and extremely observant.

Even now, Tony still found himself in appreciative awe of James’s ability to pick up on his wavelength. There was a big disconnect sometimes between what he thought he wanted, and what he actually needed in the moment. James always knew, though, knew when things should be slow and tender, or playful, or quick and dirty, or a little rough and tumble.

For his part, Tony never had to ask either, could tell just by the look in his eyes when James needed Tony to remind him of who and where he was, hold him, make him feel safe, and whole, and yeah. They were good like that, good at taking care of each other, good at anticipating and fulfilling each other's needs, which fit in perfectly with Tony’s whole marriage theory.

It was why he knew without having to ask that James was going to take his time this morning, was going to slowly fuck him into the mattress until he was so blissed out he couldn't string words
together coherently, let alone get tangled up in his own thoughts.

"Mm, thanks for yesterday," Tony said between kisses.

"Glad to have been able to give back some of what you've given me." James's smile was a little sad, a little shy, a little proud. "Thanks for letting me."

"You're amazing, have I told you that yet today?" Tony ran his hands up under the tank top James was wearing, dragging his fingers along the muscular contours of his back. "I'm so unbelievably lucky that you love me."

"Hmm, I like the idea of destiny more than luck," James countered, kissing him again.

Minty morning kisses were some of Tony's favorites, especially in combination with petting. James kept them coming while his hand trailed down the curve of Tony's jaw, his neck, and shoulder, then across his chest, fingers teasing over a nipple before stroking his flank, then working back up again.

"Yeah, destiny," Tony murmured, lost in James's eyes, and the feeling of his mouth. "Let's go with that."

He pushed and tugged, and with a laugh James let him pull the tank top off so that they were both down to their underwear, which was much better.

Tony hummed contentedly as James kissed, licked, and sucked his way along his jaw, the shell of his ear, down his neck, nuzzling at his collarbone. Enjoyed the warmth of him, the feeling of skin against skin while breathing in the scent of James.

James worried at the curve of Tony's shoulder with his teeth, sucking on the skin there while making a happy little humming noise, as Tony played with his hair, and smiled stupidly over the familiar vampire routine.

They each had their little respective kinks, and one of James's was leaving marks behind on Tony's skin. At first, he'd thought it was just a possessive thing, but there was more to it than that. James had still been distrustful of his memories when they'd started sleeping together, and so originally the marks had been used as proof to himself that the encounter had actually happened.

These days, it just served as erotic stimuli, which Tony was fully onboard with. Most of the time they were in places no one would see, but every once in a while he got carried away and Tony would find a large, obvious hickey peeking out above the collar of his shirt when dressing afterwards.

Admittedly, he got an entirely juvenile thrill out of this when it happened, and maybe sometimes even waited until James was at the brink of orgasm, then angled his neck enticingly so James would latch onto him as he came.

James healed so fast that any marks Tony tried to leave were gone almost as soon as they were made, which meant he was the only one of them walking around with love bites or faint fingertip shaped bruises on his body.

Of course, James was wearing something of Tony's that was a little larger than a hickey. Even though the arm proudly displayed Captain America's insignia, it was his loving craftsmanship very obviously attached to James's body, which was definitely a thrill all of its own.

James returned to focusing on Tony's mouth, soft yet insistent kisses that had him making little hungry noises, his heart happily thumping away, pumping more and more blood south.
Tony wriggled, and hooked a leg around James, rocking up against him, groaning loudly when James slid a hand up along the outside of his thigh, then beneath him to squeeze his ass. He had a few blissful moments of friction while enjoying James’s tongue in his mouth, before he lost all that pressure and weight, James shifting onto his side beside him.

“Do I get to dance with you at Pepper’s wedding?”

James’s voice had already gone all low, and husky, and the question sent a little shiver through Tony, as it was asked right up against his ear, James’s breath puffing hotly across his skin. It was a nice contrast to the cool, metallic fingers teasing their way up and down the inside of his thigh.

“Oh, absolutely,” Tony answered, tilting his head back a bit to give James more room to nuzzle at his neck. “As much dancing as you can handle. I’ll even let you lead.”

“We can take turns.”

James brought their mouths together again, a smile in his eyes, and Tony was suddenly feeling much more excited about Pepper's wedding. They’d danced together a handful of times, but only while at home, and there was a part of him that loved the idea of everyone being able to see how well they moved together.

“You can dip me if you, oh,” Tony momentarily forgot about dancing as James began stroking him through his underwear, “want.”

“Might take you up on that offer.”

Tony grinned, chased after James’s mouth, catching his lower lip with his teeth, earning himself a soft, hungry noise in return. The stroking was definitely nice, he was a big fan of being groped by James, especially when he was also getting himself kissed stupid.

He went to reciprocate, eager to do a little stroking of his own, but James made a soft tutting noise, and intercepted his hand.

“Oh, it’s like that is it?” Tony asked, thoroughly enjoying the wicked glint in James’s eyes.

“Yup.” He shifted a bit, mouth latching onto one of Tony’s nipples, his hand back to stroking Tony's cock through his boxers.

Pushing his luck, Tony caressed the side of James's face, ran his fingers through his hair, which seemed to be on the approved interactions list, at least.

James teased his fingers through the opening of Tony's boxers, causing him to huff with pleasure, the contact almost maddeningly light. He shifted his hips, and James bit down on his nipple.

"Patience."

"What if I have none?” Tony waggled his eyebrows, and earned himself a head shake.

"I have enough for both of us.” James was kind enough to stroke him with a little more purpose as he returned to the kissing. Tony could only wiggle, and whine, and suck on James's tongue, drag his fingers along muscled shoulders, play with his hair, all while James destroyed him with kisses, and got him hard enough that he began to worry he might come before ever getting naked.

"Please, so much pretty please, with all of the sugar on top, James,” he finally groaned, "at least let me touch your cock, come on!"
"Hmm," James sat up, shifted back on his heels and studied Tony for a moment, before ordering, "out of the boxers."

"Oh, thank fuck," Tony all but cheered, yanking them out of the way and tossing them across the room.

James smiled, and made a little gesture with his fingers, indicating Tony should turn over, which he did as quickly as possible. James grabbed his hips, pulling him up and away from the bed, before giving him a little smack on the bottom.

"No touching yourself."

"Ooh, the hot bossy voice," Tony cooed, shifting his legs further apart. "Gah," which was hardly suave sounding, but entirely appropriate, because James had decided Tony's balls belonged in his mouth, which actually seemed like a great place for them, now that he was thinking about it.

Tony shifted more of his weight onto his forearms, spread his legs a bit wider, and groaned happily as James adjusted his focus, licking a hot, wet trail up between his asscheeks.

Tony was a big fan of James's enthusiastic approach to eating ass, which was balanced out nicely by how wild he got when Tony reciprocated. It utterly destroyed his willpower seeing James squirm, and spread himself wide, begging for it. Huge, huge turn on.

Before James had come along, it had been a while since he'd had anyone (except himself, when operating solo) paying any attention to that particular part of his body in any capacity, really, and he had to admit, he'd missed it in a big way.

Over the years, he'd perfected his technique for feeling people out on their interest level where rimming was concerned, carefully hiding his disappointment if they weren't, so as to avoid making anyone feel pressured.

Clearly, he had done something right in life, pleased some Asgardian demi-god of rimming, because —gift of gifts—James was as into it as Tony was, maybe even more so, would happily bury his tongue in Tony's ass at any given moment. In Tony's experience, that level of enthusiasm was rare, and something to be cherished.

Tony all but purred as James stroked his thighs, his hips, made contented little noises, and took him to pieces with his tongue before sliding a metal finger inside of him, and then starting all over again.

"I love how much more of you I can feel now," James said, swirling his finger and making Tony gasp.

"See, my upgrades are always, ooh, win win," Tony mumbled, and James made a soft noise of agreement before pulling his finger back out. "Aww!"

"I'm grabbing lube," he chided, laughing.

He did just that, moving quickly, stopping to kiss Tony again, just enough to get him breathless, before his tongue was back to work.

"Lube, yes, because, ah, fucking me, that would be good," Tony babbled, "you should do that."

James just chuckled, low and dirty, and Tony groaned as the finger returned, now lubed and bringing a friend along with it. With some quick manipulation, James had his mouth around Tony's cock, dragging a loud, guttural moan out of him.
And there went the higher brain functions, right out the window, two slick metal fingers working in his ass with James's hot, beautiful mouth wrapped around him. Tony shifted so he could look between his legs, watch hungrily. James's eyes were hooded, and serious, and Tony throbbed in his mouth, gasping loudly, enjoying the way James's lips visibly curled in a smile around his cock.

"You're still so dressed," Tony complained.

He regretted saying anything, because James stopped sucking in order to answer. "Behave and maybe I'll get undressed."

Yeah, the bossy voice was definitely a turn on. "Am I not behaving? I feel very behaved, ah, oh, um. What?"

There was a laugh from behind him, as James curled his fingers again, and Tony gasped, and pushed back, trying to get more.

Three metal fingers working him, James licking and sucking at his balls, and a hand relentlessly stroking his cock meant Tony had to bite down on his lower lip to keep himself from begging James to just marry him already. He was going to have to do something about that, come up with an excellent plan soon, because proposing to someone while they had their fingers in your ass was also not ideal.

Tony groaned, and rocked himself, taking fistfuls of sheets while alternating between squeezing his eyes shut and looking between his legs so he could watch James jerking him off, warm, lubed fingers tugging expertly at his cock, while three of the metal ones focused on his prostate.

"Fuck, James—oh, yeah—really?"

"Don't worry, I'll get naked after you come," James said, "fuck you nice and slow."

Tony liked the sound of that, but also wasn't positive he'd be able to get hard again, and really liked being able to come with James's cock in his ass; it was probably one of his favorite things to do.

At the same time, he was already dribbling, and throbbing dangerously in James's hand, his balls tight and tingling, and there wasn't any point in fighting a losing cause, so...

So he pressed his face into the bed, crying out loudly, sputtering a string of profanity while he came, and came, his whole body shaking with it, clamping down on James's fingers, his hips jerking spasmodically.

James stroked him through it all, kissing and nuzzling the backs of his thighs, and softly encouraging him, until it became too much. James let go of him, the metal fingers sliding free, and Tony had a long, empty moment to catch his breath, James's breath warm against his ass.

"Was that behaving?" Tony asked once he was able to talk again, giggling a bit.

"Definitely. You get a gold star, Antoshka."

"Please don't make me think of Clint while you're—oh baby."

Tony twisted so he could look over his shoulder. James was smirking, which was such a good look on him, it really, really was. He'd also taken his fingers, the ones sticky with Tony's come, and slid them between Tony's ass cheeks, pushed them inside of him, thrusting a few times before pulling out, and then...
"You're the best possible kind of pervert," Tony sighed, groaning as James began enthusiastically licking him clean. "Absolutely perfect."

"You say the sweetest things."

James grabbed him by the hips and rolled him like he weighed nothing at all. Tony grinned, and sprawled, and watched eagerly as James finally got naked.

Tony wasn't a size queen, had learned early on that there could, in fact, be too much of a good thing, and that either way, fun came in all shapes and sizes. Be that as it may, he'd absolutely thrilled the first time he saw James's (gorgeous, thick, ample) cock jutting proudly out of his jeans, and hadn't stopped enjoying the sight of it since.

"Since I behaved and everything, do I get to suck it?" He batted his eyelashes and bit into his lower lip. James began touching himself, head tilted a bit to the side, his free hand stroking his chin as if he was in a state of deep contemplation, so Tony added, “Pretty please?” and made grabby hand motions.

“How can I say no to that?”

James slowly crawled his way up to the top of the bed, dragging his lips and tongue over Tony’s body along the way, helping himself to another kiss before he knelt beside Tony, who grabbed him by the back of the thighs, and pulled him in close.

Tony loved sucking dick in general, had always gotten off on it, but there was an extra special thrill in going down on James. He always made the most amazing, almost awestruck noises of appreciation, while adoringly stroking Tony’s face, or playing with his hair, murmuring little words of encouragement.

This morning, he seemed content to let Tony take over for a while, which suited him just fine. It meant he could lose himself in the taste, the scent of James, the weight of him against his tongue. Tease up along the underside, trace the contours of him with his tongue, get lost in the feeling of wrapping his lips around the head his cock, again and again, until James was whimpering.

Tony made his own little happy noises, and stared up at James adoringly as he began sucking in earnest, wishing he hadn't already come, because he absolutely loved jerking off with James in his mouth. Loved watching James watch him do it.

James groaned loudly, and took hold of the headboard for support, as Tony grabbed him by the ass and just went for it, taking him into the back of his throat, feeling that wonderful, perfect combination of powerful, and vulnerable. He sucked, and bobbed, and encouraged James to fuck his face a bit, reveling in the taste of him.

Tony had no idea how long he was happily sucking away—he tended to lose track of time when he was doing something he loved—before James took him firmly, but carefully by the chin, and pulled away.

“Aww!”

But then he was getting kissed stupid again, with that perfect sort of urgency, James’s breathing coming quick, and loud, and so Tony grabbed fistfuls of his hair, and kissed back, chasing after his tongue, until even this was taken away.

“Aww!”

James stared at him, his pupils blown, face flushed, and Tony could only grin back stupidly, thinking to himself, “I did that,” and, “I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you.”
With a contented sigh, Tony stretched, watching as James began working lube over his cock, doing some sighing of his own. Before Tony could ask how James wanted him, he was being flipped over onto his stomach. He went to push himself up onto all fours, but James grabbed him by the nape of the neck, rubbing the muscles there, before moving down to massage a shoulder, then gave a little shove so that Tony was lying back down.

Taking the hint, he folded his hands beneath his chin and smiled, enjoying the one-handed shoulder massage James was treating him to, before becoming completely distracted by the return of the lubed fingers.

“See how patient I’m being?” He glanced over his shoulder, his heart hammering in anticipation. “I mean, I could totally be begging you to fuck me right now, telling you how much I need you inside me, but instead I’m being patient.”

James laughed at this, and pulled Tony’s hips up just a bit, began rubbing the head of his cock back and forth, back and forth, making Tony’s nerve endings scream with want. Draping himself across Tony’s back, James continued rocking himself against Tony’s ass, kissing the curve of his shoulder, before licking along the shell of his ear.

“I can tease too, you know,” his breath came in a hot puff against Tony’s skin, and he shuddered. “JARVIS said you had nothing on the books, so we have all the time in the world.”

“I concede,” Tony gasped. “You’re King Patience, always and forever. I’ll make you a new uniform and everything. Right after you fuck me.”

James shifted back, spent some more time rubbing Tony’s shoulders, the muscles in his back, stroking his sides, and his ass, before finally—finally—spreading him wide. Then there was glorious pressure, with just a hint of pain, and Tony’s breath left him; he could only focus on forcing himself to relax, to open, to take it.

Slow, slow, and slow. James hadn’t been kidding, was taking his sweet time, and Tony lost himself to it, hissing with pleasure as inch after inch was pushed inside of him, James once again caressing him everywhere he could reach, whispering soft words of praise.

Giving himself to James was liberating. He didn’t like to think of it as submitting, exactly, because it was less giving in, or giving up, and a whole lot more like letting go. Just ditching all the noise in his head, the doubts and fears, all the whirling distractions. He didn’t have to (couldn’t, really) think, could let his mind quiet, could lose himself to the sensation of being filled, and stretched, and loved.

James had him by the hips, was sliding in and out of him now, a gentle rocking motion that already had Tony panting, and smiling, his face pressed into the sheets. The initial pain and discomfort had fallen away, leaving nothing but contentment in its wake.

Tony sighed, rolling his hips, dragging a groan from James in the process. There was something surreal about being fucked after having already come, the urgency being supplanted with awareness, and appreciation, and the slow rebuilding of desire. He could feel his body’s lazy response to the stimuli, but it was almost distant, fuzzy and indistinct when compared to the light, bubbling sensation of happiness that had taken up residence in his chest.

Almost as if sensing Tony’s haziness, James lowered himself until they were skin to skin, his warmth and weight pinning Tony to the mattress, hands sliding under and around, until Tony found himself wrapped up tightly in strong arms, could feel James’s breath against his skin, feel the roughness of his stubble, the press of lips against the curve of his shoulder blade.
James licked and sucked his way up to Tony’s ear, tugging on the lobe with his teeth. “Gonna be tough keeping my hands off of you while we’re dancing.”

He could feel the words spoken in a hot rush against his ear, James’s voice low, and strained, the sentiment punctuated by a particularly on-point thrust. Tony had a momentary flash of James groping him on the dance floor, of the two of them sneaking off somewhere semi-private to have a quick fuck against a wall, and there was no question as to whether or not he’d be getting hard again, because yup, that was already happening.

“Gotta say, the idea of grinding against you on the dance floor is pretty hot.”

Face nestled between Tony’s shoulder blades, James made a gravely sound of agreement; Tony could feel it vibrating through his own body, pressed together as they were, and shuddered in response, muscles tightening around James in the process. With a soft gasp of pleasure, James grabbed him by the shoulder, by the hip, pulling him back up on his knees in order to ride him a little harder.

“I really haven’t been scandalous lately.”

“No elevator sex outside of the Tower,” James reminded him.

Words spilled from Tony’s mouth, his voice made broken and disjointed by James’s thrusts, and his own breathlessness. “Do you have any idea—fuck—how much we’d be able to sell that video for?”

James laughed, and landed a playful smack across Tony’s ass before pulling out, and rolling him onto his side. Tony hardly had time to process the absence of James’s cock, or his new position on the bed, before James was curled against his back, hooking one of Tony’s legs up over his arm, and sliding back into him.

With a soft grunt of pleasure, Tony shifted until he was more comfortable, reaching for the stubbled curve of James’s jaw, pulling him into a sloppy kiss, his heart lurching almost painfully. Some of James’s hair was plastered to his face, his cheeks flushed, his eyes dark, and filled with adoration.

“Did JARVIS actually record us?” James asked, mouth curling in a sly, dangerous smile.

Tony swallowed, momentarily distracted by the heat in James's eyes. "Uh, no, the cameras were off.”

"Hm, we could do it again with them on," and Tony's breath caught in his chest, partly from the suggestion, partly from James changing the angle of his attack. "No selling it though. I'm selfish," James whispered into Tony's ear, "you're for my eyes only."

Tony bit down hard into his lower lip, because it would probably also be bad form to ask James to marry him in response to an offer to make their own porn.

James groaned, his thrusts slow, and deep. "I can tell you like the idea."

"Yeah, I don't know if there are enough positive adjectives to, ah, express my enthusiastic endorsement of this idea."

James's mouth was on his again, and Tony couldn't help it, he had to wrap a hand around his cock, start to stroke himself as he moaned into James's mouth. "I'll build us sex drones," he babbled, "so we have lots of camera angles."

Tony was rocked by another wave of laughter from James, and for just a moment was reminded of a
time (not that long ago, really) when James’s smiles were rare, his laughter rarer still. Thought of the heaviness he’d been carrying around with him for so long, too scared of what might happen if he just let it all go. Thought of how far they’d each managed to come since the afternoon Steve Rogers had walked into his workshop with the haunted, broken remnants of Bucky Barnes in tow.

“Mm, bet we look beautiful together.” James nuzzled his neck, mouth sucking hungrily at the muscles there, and any residual laziness was washed away by a newfound sense of urgency.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Tony rocked his hips insistently, twisted and reached until he had James’s mouth crushed against his own, their eyes locked together, and that was better.

Whatever it was (pride, an almost sweet melancholy, love, gratitude) that had churned up inside of his chest must have shown on his face. In an instant, James had Tony on his back, legs spread wide, sliding home inside of him even as Tony reached for him frantically, arms and legs winding around James, pulling him in, breathing almost as if he might have a panic attack.

“I’ve got you,” James said, the beautiful, welcome weight of him pinning Tony down, metal hand cupping the side of his face.

Tony twisted, sucking James’s thumb into his mouth, reveling in the hot slide of warm skin against skin, James’s hair tumbling into his face. He was everywhere, and it was perfect, it was just what Tony needed. He could only nod, and writhe, rut against the hard, muscled expanse of James’s body, and lose himself in the blue of his eyes, some of the urgency subsiding as he was able to ground himself again.

If he was being honest, he’d fluctuated on the aggressive eye contact early on. It had been hot, then intimidating, then alarmingly hot, then just a little terrifying. Tony had spent some time wondering if James had been as ferocious with the eye contact back before HYDRA. He suspected the answer was no, which he (guiltily) liked, because it meant he was the only person to have been on the receiving end of all that intimate intensity.

Now, it was a lifeline, something for his mind to hold onto as he shook with pleasure. Those eyes saw things in him that no one else ever had, were always filled with appreciation, and understanding, and love. It made him feel crazy all over again, but also safe enough to just toss his fears (he’d learned the hard way that nothing lasts forever) aside, give himself over to the happiness.

“Yeah, that’s it,” James said, “I’m not going anywhere, Antoshka.”

They kissed again, the soft play of lips beautifully synced up with the sensation of James’s cock throbbing deep inside of him.

“Me neither,” Tony promised, grinning wildly. “You and me, right?”

James answered him with a moan, another kiss, and by pulling back enough to wrap a hand around Tony’s cock. “Me and you,” he agreed.

Slow and steady was abandoned for hard and fast, James’s hand working in time with his thrusts, and Tony held on, heels digging into James’s ass encouragingly, panting with pleasure.

He was damp with sweat, frantic, his body vibrating with pleasure, and somehow, despite all of this, the orgasm still caught him completely off guard; Tony cried out loudly, while James smirked down at him, continued stroking him until Tony had to smack his hand away, giggling as he did so.
"Overload," he gasped, still feeling giddy and overwhelmed.

James grabbed him by the hips and drove into him, whimpering with each thrust. Tony stared up at him, thinking of destiny and dancing at weddings, watching the change ripple across James's face as he edged closer to his own orgasm.

"I've got you," Tony said, giving James's words back to him.

A flurry of expletives uttered in Russian came pouring out of James's mouth, even as his hips lost their rhythm and he emptied himself inside of Tony, fingers digging into his skin as he held on for dear life.

Moments later, Tony had an armful of James, and he held on tightly, running his hands over every bit he could reach before rubbing soothing circles against his back until James finally managed to prop himself up a bit.

"You okay?" he asked, pink faced, and sweaty, and gorgeous.

"Okay? No, not even close to it," Tony paused to kiss him, brushing the hair out of James's face. "I'm ridiculously happy, and a little fucked out, that's what I am."

He kissed James again, slow and lingering, and it was difficult because neither of them could stop grinning ear to ear.

"You seemed lost for a minute back there," James murmured, his eyes searching Tony's face.

"No, not lost. Just... It's weird, you know?"

Because it was James, he didn't need to explain further; he got it. Happiness could feel dangerous, untrustworthy, could leave you squirming with guilt and fear. Love could feel threatening, at least until you just let go, and accepted that you were worthy of it, were capable of giving it in return. It was hard not to get caught up in anticipating the end, but Tony was determined to do his best, to focus on the now, on every moment they had together, value it accordingly.

“Yeah, I know,” James agreed. He shifted around until he was curled against Tony, head tucked under his chin. “We could always quit, go live on that island.”

Tony laughed, and snuggled even closer, rubbing his cheek against the top of James’s head. “Come on, you’ve been subjected to enough pop culture by now to know that retiring is the kiss of death. We’ll just honeymoon on the island. For, like, a year.”

James propped himself up on an elbow, a strange, almost childlike look of wonder plastered across his face. “I like this plan.”

“Of course you do, I’m great at plans,” Tony said with a smile, feeling flustered, and unsure as to why, exactly, he was feeling that way. His confusion must have been obvious, because James’s expression shifted into deviousness, which was a distractingly good look on him.

“What?”

James only smirked, and kissed him again, before shaking his head. “Nothing,” he said, biting into his lower lip a bit as he smiled. “Just coming up with my own plans. How ’bout a shower, then I’ll make us some French Toast?”

“Not a bad plan,” Tony answered, stretching like a cat.
He shifted to get up, but found himself pinned in place, James’s bionic hand against the arc reactor. He’d ditched the smirk for a goofy smile. “I love you.”

“Yeah you do,” Tony said, placing his hand over James’s. “I love you, too.”

This got him another round of kisses, before he found himself being pulled up and out of the bed, James holding his hand as he led Tony to the shower. When James let go of his hand to turn on the shower, Tony gave him a little smack on the ass, and decided that after French Toast, and possibly a nap, he’d fire up a new project with JARVIS: Operation Proposal.

Chapter End Notes

ARGH! This took forever. Sorry about the delay, but, you know, being an adult sucks pretty bad sometimes. What can you do? Gots to pay the bills, so...

Anyway, FINALLY! Snuggles! Good feelings! Tony has realizations! And tips his hand without even realizing it, ha ha ha. I think a little bit of melancholy slipped in at points, but considering the source, this is amazingly free of angst. *pats self on back*

Seriously, though, these idiots are so in love. I’m looking forward to them dancing at Pepper’s wedding.

Also, in case you missed it, I made the cover to Bruce's autobiography. I regret nothing.
Regression Analysis

Chapter Summary

His heart was still lurching around his chest in alarm, and it was taking every bit of his self restraint to keep himself from tearing at James’s uniform, stripping him down in order to look him over, every last little bit of him. He seemed unharmed, but as far as explosions went, this one had been magic. And magic could most definitely go fuck itself.

Chapter Notes

This is a story about healing emotional wounds, and as a result, it gets very, very feels-heavy. I promise you, this isn't just self indulgence. Tony has a lot of childhood issues (in my mind, in my universe) that he'll be working through as a result of what has happened. Steve is also healing, and by the end of this emotional roller-coaster, everyone will be in a much better place. Promise. ;)

“This—this right here?—this is why magic can just go fuck itself!”

“Watch the language,” Bucky snapped, glaring daggers at Tony, his hands automatically clamping down over little ears, as if to protect them.

Tony could only gape, his rage momentarily taking a backseat to his incredulity. “Are you serious? James! If there was ever a time to use profanity…”

“Not in front of the kid.” And the worst part was, he was dead serious. “That goes for the rest of you, too.”

Those baby blues of his were flashing angrily, his jaw was clenched, and he’d slipped into Russian, all calm, controlled, and (unfortunately) incredibly, distractingly sexy. Of course, that might have also been because Tony was still keyed up from the battle itself, and the overwhelming relief that the psychedelic looking explosion that’d gone off hadn’t actually obliterated two of the most important people in the world to him.

His heart was still lurching around his chest in alarm, and it was taking every bit of his self restraint to keep himself from tearing at James’s uniform, stripping him down in order to look him over, every last little bit of him. He seemed unharmed, but as far as explosions went, this one had been magic. And magic could most definitely go fuck itself.

“I shall seek out my brother,” Thor suggested somberly, “though I cannot be certain he will reverse what has been done, even if it is within his ability to do so. His sense of humor is… peculiar.”

“Is that what we’re calling crazy now?” Clint muttered, adding, “What? Like he isn’t?” in his own defense when everyone glared at him.
“Thanks, Thor,” James said, “that’d be great.”

And something in his voice, or in the way he said it made Tony’s stomach lurch, reminded him of why he’d been about to go on a tirade to begin with.

“Right, for a start, maybe let’s get him the f…” James’s eyes narrowed and Tony winced, “erm, out of here?” He sighed, began rubbing his temples, because he was so over this already, it wasn’t even funny.

“Thor, talk to Loki,” James ordered, “Iron Man, get as much data as possible from the scene, we might need it. Widow, see about the Hulk—I’ll need Bruce with me—then provide backup for Iron Man. Hawkeye, coordinate with Coulson, then do the same. Let’s wrap it up and get out of here, people.”

Tony blinked and bit back his natural response, which was another string of profanity, because… well…

“Hey, uh, can I talk to you first, for like two seconds?”

James frowned as he shifted his grip on the child in his arms. For a long, agonizing moment, Tony thought he was going to get shot down, but James nodded, and with the teary-eyed kid now balanced on his hip, walked a few paces away so they could talk in relative privacy.

“You okay?” he asked softly, studying James’s face.

“Don’t have time not to be,” he answered, but some of the cold professionalism had left his voice. That was something, at least.

“This isn’t one of those body swap, mind meld things, is it?” James snorted at this, and Tony really, really wanted to kiss him. “Good, great. Get him out of here, we’ll see you back at the Tower.”

A tiny fist banged against the armor, dragging Tony’s attention away from James and sure enough, there was that bottom dropping out sensation again. Big, blue, watery eyes looked up at him in utter fascination, and Tony only just caught himself before slamming down the faceplate in order to avoid the eye contact altogether.

Instead, he swallowed past his growing panic, and refocused on James. “It would be bad, if this got out.”

“I know.” James jerked his head in the direction of the crater the magical explosion had left in its wake. “Get to work.”

Tony did as he was told, but once he was hidden safely behind the faceplate said to JARVIS, “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted a drink more than right now.” And although he was facing the opposite direction, Tony watched via the suit as, behind him, James stooped to pick up the discarded, now too-big clothing, and Captain America’s shield. “Make that drinks, plural.”

Chapter 2

Although it was ridiculous to hope he could ever be so lucky, Tony was half expecting that by the time they got home they’d find Steve waiting for them, having somehow (magically? ha!) reverted to his normal size, and age, and everything else.

Of course, that wasn’t how his life worked, so Steve was still a baby—or maybe toddler was a better term? Kids under a certain age all looked the same to Tony. There was no real point in sweating the
terminology anyway, because it all boiled down to the same thing: Captain America was tiny, vulnerable, and terrifying.

Bruce was in the middle of taking some sort of non-invasive body scan on his new patient while James hovered nearby, his face eerily blank as he kept hold of a miserable Steve, as if worried he intended to throw himself off the exam table in an attempt to escape.

Steve’s blond hair was sticking up all crazily atop his head as if he’d been trying to pull it out to better express how much he did not enjoy what was happening. And just in case it wasn’t perfectly clear that Steve was over it, he was also crying. These weren’t your typical upset baby tears, they were painfully miserable sounding, high pitched, choked off sobs with hiccups, his face a very unflattering bright red, tiny fists balled.

The sound cut right through everything, and left Tony grimacing in equal parts discomfort and annoyance.

"Where’s the volume knob on that thing?"

And then the strangest thing happened—Steve stopped crying. Just like that, the wailing came to an abrupt halt, his miserable expression shifting (to delight?) as he caught sight of Tony approaching. A chirpy sort of anxious happy noise followed, along with flailing arms.

"Finally," James snapped, and gestured for Tony to join them. When Tony hesitated, feet already deciding he should back out of Bruce’s lab instead, James gave him a, "don’t you fucking dare," look.

"Hey," Bruce said, smiling wanly as Tony sidled up. He gestured to their little bundle of definitely not joy, and Tony eyeballed Steve for a moment (long enough to notice he was now wearing one of Natasha’s tiny tank tops like it was a dress) before Bruce added, “So, this is weird.”

"You can say that again."

He was doing his best to stay clear of the chubby little hands reaching for him, pointedly ignoring little not-Steve’s increasingly urgent babbling. Easier to focus on the data streaming across Bruce’s displays. Data was comforting.

"So what’s the deal, Brucie-bear? How do we get the shrinky dink here back to a regulation sized super soldier?"

If the tone shift in the baby-speak was any indication, the kid had figured out Tony was ignoring him and disapproved. He wasn’t the only one, either.

"Tony," James was using his ‘serious’ voice, was all tight jaw and narrowed eyes when Tony finally managed to make himself look up from the monitors. As he watched, James covered Steve’s ears, which was kind of unnecessary since he only mouthed the next bit. "Pick him the fuck up already."

Like it was that simple. Tony pulled a face, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’m here to science, not babysit.”

He shouldn’t have been surprised by the shocked disappointment, but it still made him uncomfortable watching the disbelief spread across James’s face before he got himself under control, and returned to his previous state of blankness. Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever actually seen James wearing that particular expression before, and definitely not because of him.

"I don’t do kids." It sounded weak and defensive and petulant even to him.
James was visibly counting down from ten in his head, Tony could all but see the numbers in his eyes. He was suspiciously flat sounding when he spoke again.

"It’s not some kid. It’s Steve."

And apparently that should have been enough, was clearly more than enough for James. He kept staring at Tony, obviously waiting (expecting) for him to get over himself. Tony looked away, hating himself, angry with James for putting him on the spot (which wasn’t fair, none of this was James’s fault), annoyed that Bruce was just standing there watching this unfold (though how could you blame him?).

Mostly he was furious with Steve fucking Rogers for managing to land himself in the middle of a magical explosion in the first place.

Steve seemed equally pissed off the longer Tony made no move towards picking him up and comforting him. Which, yes, okay, he was willing to concede that it should be simple, or could be for some people, maybe, but not for him.

He didn’t “do kids” for the good of the human race, because he should not be trusted with tiny humans. He had a corrupt fucking algorithm in his head—recursion at its worst—everything currently leading back to that drink he couldn’t have.

Tony had managed to (mostly) ignore it while following orders and gathering data at the scene, had drowned it out by sharing nervous bickering with Clint during the ride home, but it was like baby Steve’s shrieking had caused an avalanche in his mind. Whoosh, there went the defenses, tumbling down around him like a house of cards. Now it felt like every nerve ending in his body was raw, and exposed, and demanding.

Just one would be okay.

Just a taste.

Special exception, right?

He ran a hand over his face, not caring that they’d see it shaking now that it wasn’t tucked away in his pocket. It’d been awhile since he’d felt the need so strongly, and Tony hated how very much he wanted to cave in.

What sucked was that he should be able to have a drink (he’d drank and kept it under control for years, hadn’t he?) on a shitty day without it being a big deal. It sounded so reasonable, so tempting, and innocuous, except he knew, he fucking knew it wouldn’t be one, because it was never just one.

And if he caved in and picked that crutch back up, it’d be that much harder to stand on his own on the next bad day. Or even a good day for that matter, because sometimes nothing was horribly wrong in his life and he still felt like he needed a drink the way normal people needed food, or sleep, or air.

There was only so much he could deal with at once, and ignoring the siren song of the bottle had to be his top priority, because everything else hinged on him staying sober. What was the point in making it worse by sticking around so James could look at him like he was a monster for not picking up the kid?

"Bruce, you got this?" he asked softly. Bruce nodded, eyes wide with concern, although at that particular moment, it felt a lot more like judgement. "I’ll be in the workshop."

He spun on his heels, his pace increasing (run away, coward!) the closer he got to the doors, trying to
ignore the waves of panic rushing through him in response to James’s hollowed out and betrayed sounding cry of, “Antoshka!”

As if adding in his own two cents, Steve began screaming his head off again, the sound thankfully cut short when the doors slid shut behind him.

It was stupid, it was just some magic, would probably wear off in a day or two, and then Steve (and his fucking life) would be back to normal again. Everyone would give him shit for being such a… well, baby, and they’d all laugh about it.

Except, the rest of his brain had already spun off into What If Land, and it was killing him. What if it didn’t just wear off? What if Steve grew in real time? There was no way James wasn’t going to step right into the role of father—he’d more or less done that already. He’d probably be good at it, too; he had the protective thing down pat.

What if when (if) Steve was back to normal, the exposure to his little-self was still enough to have activated James’s dormant paternal instincts, made him realize he wanted that sort of family after all? Pepper had wanted kids and it’d always been there, a black little wedge between them.

He wanted to spend whatever was left of his life with James, but he absolutely, positively, did not want a kid, even if that kid was Steve. Especially if that kid was Steve. And if Steve’s transformation was permanent, there was no way in hell James was letting anyone else raise him. Which meant he was more or less fucked six ways to Sunday if they didn’t find a way to hit undo on the whole magical age regression thing.

That also rankled. How ridiculously unfair was his life that he even had to think the words ‘magical age regression’ let alone deal with the ramifications of something like that interrupting a perfectly good Tuesday afternoon? It wasn’t the sort of thing he’d ever prepared for, because—hello!—aging tended to work just in the one direction.

He certainly hadn’t been prepared for his own downward spiral of a reaction, that was for sure. He doubted Steve’s situation felt like a death sentence to the rest of the team.

If he was being honest, though, it wasn’t just the kid thing. It was a Steve thing, a Captain America thing, in ways he couldn’t quite quantify.

It was Howard, crowing with delight somewhere in the back of his mind.

By the time the elevator doors slid open, his hands were really shaking, his mouth was painfully dry, and his vision was going a bit wonky at the edges thanks to the hyperventilating he’d been doing.

Considering how shitty his day was turning out, it figured a panic attack would factor in next. He practically ran over to the couch, dropped down onto it, and tried to focus first on getting his breathing back under control, trying to push away the fear, and anxiety, reminding himself that he wasn’t actually having a heart attack.

Working on autopilot, he fished his hand under the couch and felt around until he came away with a half empty bottle of scotch. It had been more than a year since it had rolled under there, and although he’d never bothered to fish it out, he’d never forgotten it was there, either. Tony suspected that wasn’t exactly good, but he’d yet to open it, so that was at least one point in the win column.

He wasn’t going to open it now, no matter how much he wanted to. He just needed to wrap his hands around the comforting shape of the bottle while reminding himself that he didn’t need to rely on it anymore. Holding, seeing, smelling the bottle was somehow easier, actually helped with the
urge. It was just a bottle, and nothing more, he’d gone up against tougher and survived.

"Sir," and JARVIS’s tone was so very careful that it just pushed him right over the edge. He gave up and let himself cry (quietly, just like when he’d been little, because the only thing worse than crying was when his father caught him doing it), hot tears sliding down his face.

"S’okay, fuck, I’m not. I won’t, J. I promise. I want to, but I won’t.” Tony exhaled Shakily, breath catching in his chest. In through the nose, out through the mouth, slow, slow, slow.

After the worst of it had passed, he managed to speak again, blurted, “I really pissed him off.”

"I believe he is more concerned than anything. Sir, it is worth noting,” and JARVIS sounded oddly hesitant here, "according to his vitals, since the incident, Master Barnes has also been experiencing high levels of stress, fear, and anxiety.”

Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat. He could read between the lines—JARVIS was trying to tell him that James needed him, that they should be facing this together. They were supposed to have each other’s backs, but Tony had run away. Had left James calling after him for help. James, who had never once left him in the lurch, or asked anything of him, even on his worst day.

James had been right at the edge of the explosion (he could still hear him screaming Steve’s name), reaching for him only to be blown back several feet. James was the one to crawl into the crater before Tony’s eyes even had time to adjust to the aftermath of the psychedelic light show, and so he had been the first to find what was left of Captain America.

Steve might not be dead, but he wasn’t exactly there, either, and so really, James had just lost his best friend, his brother. And when he’d needed Tony the most, needed to be able to count on him, Tony had run away to wallow in his own bullshit, and left James to deal with everything all alone.

"Are they still in the lab?” He swiped at his face, pushing aside the tears, shoving the bottle back under the couch before standing.

"Yes. I’m afraid Captain Rogers has also been highly distressed since your hasty departure.”

Like it or not, Tony knew what he had to do. “Suck it up, Stark.”

This time, he forced himself to focus on Steve as he pushed his way back into the lab in a rush, stalked right over to him (hey, and he’d stopped crying again), picked him up like he was a hornet’s nest, and asked Bruce, “Is he still rocking the serum?”

Steve burbled happily, chubby little hands grasping at Tony’s arms as if his life depended on it, which was just plain weird. The squirming made Tony nervous (James would kill him if he dropped Steve, serum or no), so he swallowed past his dread, and shifted his grip so that Steve was resting against his chest.

"All signs point to yes,” Bruce confirmed, mouth pressed into a thin line as the baby super soldier snuggled up to Tony.

A tiny hand smacked against the arc reactor, and it took every ounce of his willpower not to give into his urge let go, dump the kid back onto the exam table, and run away again.

"Okay, so he’s probably starving.”

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Tony finally faced James, and winced at the hurt on display in his
blue eyes. Now that he was actually letting himself see what was there, it was fairly obvious that James was only just managing to keep it together.

"I'm sorry, James, so fu…” he caught himself, swallowed around the profanity, and started again. “Really, really sorry.”

Steve let loose with another round of baby-talk, this time alarmingly serious sounding, a string of syllables and noises that Tony interpreted as, “I think you owe me an apology as well, Tony.”

“Yeah, well, this is all your fault, so don’t push your luck,” he grumbled, glaring at the baby he was holding. Steve swung a chubby little hand and scored a direct hit to Tony’s nose, chattering away indignantly. “Ow! Point taken, sorry. I hereby formally concede that you didn’t wake up this morning planning to end your day as a baby.”

Solemn, ridiculously large blue eyes looked up at him almost victoriously, and Tony found himself unable to look away now that he’d been sucked in. “You were probably too wrapped up in screaming your head off to notice, but I’m kind of having a nervous breakdown at the moment, so maybe cut me some slack, Steve.”

Steve pushed out his lower lip, and this time his little noises sounded curiously understanding and sympathetic to Tony’s ears. He flailed again, and Tony nodded. “Let’s just say today is not a good day to be an alcoholic, panic attack prone, self-absorbed jerk with daddy issues.”

He sighed, shifting Steve’s weight to his hip. Steve might have been smaller, but he wasn’t exactly a lightweight. “Do me a favor and give me a heads up if you feel any sudden growth spurts coming on. The press’ll have a fucking field day if Iron Man is crushed to death by a half-naked Captain America.”

A little hand smacked him in the mouth, and Tony rolled his eyes, prepared to defend his foul language to their little fearless leader right up until he realized that Bruce and James were staring at him. Like, staring, staring. James was staring hard enough that it almost looked like he’d forgotten all about Tony letting him down. Almost.

"Are you two done?" he asked, and that was his battlefield voice, all cool professionalism.

Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat. “James…”

"Later. At least you’re here now,” he interrupted, cutting Tony’s second attempt at apologizing short. "Bruce, what can we feed him?"

"Well, he has teeth, and seems to be at least a year old. Start with foods he likes, avoid too much spice, break everything up enough to prevent choking, and you should be fine.”

James nodded his thanks and stalked out of the room, leaving Tony scrambling to keep up.

"Okay, then I guess we see if I can avoid having a panic attack while baby-proofing a breakfast burrito for Captain America."

Chapter 3

Tony hadn’t exactly expected James to warm up once they were in the elevator, but he’d hoped at least for another opportunity to apologize.
“Look, the way I handled that earlier…”

“Not now,” James interrupted, jabbing at the elevator buttons as if that would make things move faster some how. He must have sensed Tony staring at him, because he squeezed his eyes shut and added quietly in Russian, “Not in front of Stevie.”

“Oh,” That could only mean he was in for it once they were alone, whenever that was. “Right, sorry.”

Tony glanced at his reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator, and suddenly felt every last minute of his age. Anyone paying even a little attention would figure out he’d been crying, could spot the exhaustion, the tension. By contrast, Steve somehow managed to look baby fresh and (he was loathe to admit) kind of cute, his tears long gone, his eyes wide and curious.

"At least my hands stopped shaking," he muttered to himself. Steve's answer was, "ba ba ba," and Tony had to agree. The comfort of the bottle always sounded like a great idea, but it was a lie. "Yeah, I know. Doesn't make it any easier, though."

James was using the mirrored walls to watch him (them), hair hanging down over his face, still wearing his uniform, the contrast of the black smudges around his bright eyes somehow making them appear wild. He looked lost, and alone, and so Tony reached for him, grabbed his hand and squeezed. For a long, awful moment, James just stood there breathing hard, but he must have sensed the desolation, the sinking pit of shame and self loathing threatening to swallow Tony whole, because he finally linked his fingers with Tony's and squeezed back.

Even though his pronunciation was laughable, Tony switched to Russian, saying, "We'll get him back, James."

"You don't know that," James growled, squeezing Tony's hand harder. "Antoshka, what if..."

James was trembling with anger, or sorrow, and Tony couldn't let him keep talking, he had to step closer, kiss him, an insistent press of lips intended to silence him. James took hold of Tony's arms, pulling him closer, his grip painfully tight as he kissed back, desperate but passionless.

"I'm sorry," Tony babbled, "I love you so much," and, "I'll fix it, I'll find a way to fix it," said it all in a hot rush against James's lips, the Russian making his tongue feel heavy and uncomfortable in his mouth.

Smooshed between them, Steve squealed indignantly, little legs kicking out as if to remind them they weren’t alone. James pushed himself away as the elevator doors slid open, but didn’t let go as his hard won mask of composure momentarily cracked wide open. Tony felt like an asshole all over again.

James’s nostrils flared as he reigned himself back in, his fingers digging painfully into Tony’s arms as he blinked and held on tightly. He hadn’t wanted to put off talking in order to yell at Tony; he was only just holding on himself, and didn’t want to lose control for fear of being unable to get it back again.

Before his eyes, James disappeared, dug somewhere deep inside of himself, found that cold detachment that screamed Winter Soldier to Tony, and sank right down into it. Images from HYDRA’s files flashed through Tony’s mind (the chair, the cryochamber) as James straightened himself up, posture rigid, militaristic, closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, there was nothing.
Tony nodded, unable to think of a better response, stepped aside so James could exit the elevator. He knew all about hiding, usually did it in the armor, or the workshop, or at the bottom of a bottle, but James didn’t need any of that, he could hide away within himself.

Steve seemed concerned with what had transpired, a chubby hand scratching at Tony's beard as he looked up at him, that ‘Captain America needs to have words with Iron Man’ expression on his face.

“Oh yeah? Well, you look like an idiot in that tank top,” Tony snapped.

Ignoring Steve’s retort, Tony sucked it up and exited the elevator, forcing a bravado he didn’t feel as he made his entrance. Whatever Clint had been saying to Natasha trailed off into nothingness as soon as he swooped into the room.

“Okay, I’ve seen some scary shit in my time, but Tony Stark with Baby Rogers takes the cake.”

“Language, Barton,” Tony scolded, ignoring Steve’s burble (yes, he was a hypocrite, but he’d earned his right to profanity, thank you very much). “Actually, here you go big mouth, have a baby,” he decided, plonking Steve down on Clint’s lap as he continued onward to the kitchen. “Consider it an early birthday present.”

“Uh…”

Tony kept on walking, even as Steve chimed in with what he thought of this particular development.

When he entered the kitchen he found James already chopping up some leftover chicken, so Tony grabbed a banana and started slicing that up.

“JARVIS, give Pepper the Cliff’s Notes version of what’s going on, see if she can rustle up some clothes, and diapers, and… I don’t know, whatever it is babies need to survive.”

“Of course, sir.”

"Don't mention Steve by name. This stays in the Tower."

He could actually hear James having a physical response to the request, the leather of his uniform creaking ominously as his muscles tensed. Softly, he added, “We don’t know how long he’s going to be stuck like this.”

“I know.”

Tony chewed on his lower lip, biting back the flood of words he wanted to vomit. Not the time. Not the place. As if to reinforce this notion, Steve was crying again, the sound like knives in Tony’s brain. Beside him, James’s grip on the knife tightened dangerously, the blade flashing where it caught the light. Tony could all too easily imagine James burying it in the cutting board in frustration.

“Tony!” Clint yelled, but he’d already thrown down the banana in defeat, and was storming out of the kitchen.

Natasha was bouncing Steve up and down in her arms, but he was once again all red in the face, screaming his head off. Clint was wincing, hands over his ears, and had never looked more relieved to see Tony.

“What did you do to him?”

Just like before, Steve’s sobs subsided at the sound of Tony’s voice, so that Clint’s defensive
response of, “Nothing!” sounded unnecessarily loud.

Natasha arched an eyebrow as she looked between Steve and Tony. “He got fussy as soon as you left,” she explained.

“Onn onn onn,” Steve wailed, making little grabby hands in Tony’s direction, his lower lip sticking out pathetically.

“Seriously?” Tony folded his arms, leaned over so that he was face to face with Steve. “I’m making you lunch, ingrate.” Steve stared at him, as if to say, “we both know you’re not cooking anything in there,” so he clarified with, “I’m helping. You can help by being a chill little capsicle.”

He managed to take two steps back towards the kitchen before Steve called after him, all pathetic and woeful, and Tony caved. If his choice was between a screaming kid, and carrying around a complacent kid, he’d take the latter.

“Add one of those stupid baby strap on whatevers to the list, J.” If Steve was going to keep this shit up, he’d need to find some way to have his hands free.

“Please, please, never say ‘baby strap-on’ ever again,” Clint begged, his face scrunched up in disgust. “I think I threw up in my mouth.” Natasha gave him a smack to the back of the head, which earned her a noise of approval from Steve.

“I believe sir was referring to a BabyBjörn,” JARVIS explained helpfully. “Ms. Potts-Hogan should be by shortly with supplies.”

“I hope the supplies include pants,” Clint grumbled, rubbing the back of his head.

Tony rolled his eyes over Steve’s protest. “Sorry buddy, I’m on Clint’s side. Pants are mandatory. If Thor has to wear them, so do you.”

Which led him to suddenly wonder how long it had been since Steve had gone to the bathroom. They didn’t exactly have diapers lying around the place, so it was entirely possible the little guy was ready to burst. He should probably be grateful he hadn’t been peed on yet.

With a world weary sigh, Tony headed for the closest bathroom with Steve tucked under an arm, wondering how the hell this was supposed to work.

“Believe me, this is much weirder for me than it is for you,” he explained as he pulled off the tank top and held Steve over the toilet. “If you have to take a piss, now’s your chance.”

Steve burbled and wriggled, so Tony turned on the faucet, then put him back in place and waited, eyes averted. “This has to be some sort of awful karmic payback,” he grumbled. “I’m sure it’s my fault, and you’re collateral damage somehow. Magic can suck it.”

In a show of solidarity, Steve chose that moment to begin emptying his bladder.

By the time they’d finished up and he’d wrestled Steve back into the tank top (he’d knotted up the extra fabric so it was now more a onesie than a dress) James had finished assembling food and was waiting for them, the plate on the floor since they didn’t have a high chair.

Steve showed his appreciation by immediately shoving a handful of chicken into his mouth, chewing enthusiastically while Tony watched to make sure he didn’t manage to choke on anything.

"The banana was my contribution," Tony pointed out, tapping a finger near the fruit, and Steve
grabbed a slice, making happy little noises as he squished banana between his fingers before licking it out of his hand.

Tony was so absorbed in watching for signs of imminent death that it took a couple minutes before he realized everyone else was staring at him. Again. "What?"

James folded his arms across his chest, and shared a look with Natasha. He had the distinct impression that they were judging him for some reason or other.

"Do we know if his mind actually regressed along with his body?"

Tony opened his mouth to answer, but let it fall shut again. Natasha's question was a good one; it should have occurred to him to ask Bruce, but he'd been too busy freaking out to give it much thought. Tony had just assumed it'd been a package deal, that maybe there were some lingering impressions left behind—"These weirdos in costumes are my friends," for example—but that otherwise he was just a baby.

"Steve, if you have adult thoughts trapped in a baby brain, throw a piece of chicken at Clint." Blue eyes stared at him as if he was a moron. "Or not." Steve grabbed more chicken, but shoved it in his mouth instead. "Well, there you have it. We’ll get Bruce to weigh in on this one, me thinks."

Natasha continued staring, the scrutiny making Tony once again hyper aware of how much he wanted a drink. Surprisingly, once he'd actually tackled the whole baby issue head on, the need had been sublimated by the strangeness that was Steve, and overwhelming concern for James. In fact, if he could manage to keep Steve from screaming bloody murder, it would be good to get James alone sooner than later, get him out of the headspace he was currently in. Try to find a way to make up for leaving him high and dry.

As if sensing his stress ratcheting up again, Steve offered Tony a piece of banana, which he accepted absentmindedly, popping it in his mouth. As soon as he swallowed, his stomach growled loudly, the introduction of food having woken it from its dormant state.

"I'm going to make myself a sandwich," Tony announced, staring pointedly at Steve. "Think you can handle me leaving the room for a couple minutes without bursting everyone's eardrums?"

Steve smacked his hand against the plate and let loose with a string of baby speak. "Alright, I'm holding you to that," Tony answered, getting to his feet. "We're gonna have words if you change your mind and start screaming."

"Go already," Steve seemed to say, so Tony got while the getting was good, slathering some peanut butter and jelly onto bread once he was in the kitchen.

He didn't hear Natasha come in behind him, so when he turned around and discovered he was no longer alone, he wound up dropping the sandwich in surprise. He made a point of glaring as he retrieved it and took a huge bite. "I've already had one panic attack today," he complained around his mouthful of food, "so could we maybe not do the sneaking up on Tony thing for a change?"

Natasha's eyes narrowed assessingly before her expression softened. "Sorry. Habit."

Tony sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. He needed to remind himself that they all loved Steve, had all been affected by what had happened, even if he and James were acting like they had the worst of it.

"Ignore me," he suggested, taking another huge bite, peanut butter making the bread stick to the roof of his mouth. "And before you ask, I don't know, Nat. Steve and I never really planned for this
contingency. I'm kind of hoping Loki has an answer." He thought about what he'd just said, spirits sinking further. "Wow, I didn't think I could feel worse, but that did the trick."

Natasha approached him carefully, as if he was a cornered, wounded animal. "Did you discuss what should happen in a worse case scenario?"

Tony processed her careful phrasing, and felt his stomach lurch painfully. He tossed his half eaten sandwich onto the countertop, and folded his arms across his chest, appetite gone.

"He's not dead," Tony pointed out.

Natasha tilted her head to the side, eyes narrowing. "He's also not capable of being Captain America at the moment."

Which was the problem he'd been trying to avoid thinking about. Tony knew as well as she did that all hell would break loose if the word got out that their fearless leader was back in diapers.

"Of course we discussed it."

Tony hadn't wanted to, but the Avengers were too important; he'd shoved aside his personal shit, and he and Steve had made contingency plans for all sorts of scenarios, including what should happen if Iron Man was killed, or permanently incapacitated.

It was how he'd come to find out there was a letter in the safe of Steve's suite with his name on it, which was a funny thing, since there was one in his own for Steve, each of the letters written long before they'd had that painfully important planning session.

"We see what we're dealing with first."

Natasha studied him, straightening up after a moment, apparently finding within him whatever it was she'd come looking for. Much to his surprise, she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, saying, "You should finish the sandwich," before leaving him alone with the lingering sweetness of her perfume in his nostrils.

Tony did as she suggested. He should feel worse—he didn't like thinking about Steve dying, it was right up there with thinking about James dying—but instead he actually felt a little better. Not much, but a tiny bit. Whether he wanted to or not, he was currently calling the shots, had a job to do, and there were people counting on him, people he loved.

"Hey JARVIS," he called softly, "let's get the other uniform ready ASAP. Just in case."

Chapter 4

It was downright eerie seeing Captain America’s expression on a baby’s face, but there it was, distilled down to its purest state.

“Like a neutron star,” Tony muttered to himself, giving an exaggerated shudder.

Bruce sniggered beside him, finishing Tony’s thought out loud with, “created by a gravitational collapse of stubbornness,” as he reapplied the biomedical electrode Steve had yanked off of himself.

And because it’d been an emotional sort of day for him, Tony wasn’t even surprised when his vision became momentarily obscured by tears. They were the good kind, the sort that
real family) had only happened in those ‘I’ve been up two days straight drinking and now I need to
tell everyone how much I love them’ sort of moments.

Bruce grokked him—he was also the only other person in the household who knew
what grok meant, so there was that—and he grokked Bruce, had fought through his and Bruce’s
individual idiosyncrasies in order have the friendship they currently co-owned. It was, without a
doubt, one of the best things that had ever happened to him in his entire life.

In fact, Tony was the proud owner of a closeness with Bruce that rivaled the intimacy he shared with
James. It was one born from a shared language (science!), experiences, and general all around
nerdiness. And maybe occasionally, inappropriately timed glee of having a problem to solve when
things were going all wrong, the sort that invariably earned them the, “you areon our side, right?”
looks from the rest of the team.

They coexisted within that sweet space born of discovery, exploring and communicating in half-
sentences and micro-expressions, disconnected from the outside world, but just right there with each
other, grooving on a problem to be solved, sharing that secret joy in ways that neither of them had
ever managed before in previous collaborations.

Sometimes it made him sad, because they’d be in the thick of something beautiful and it would occur
to Tony that this could have been his relationship with Howard (if only…) or Bruce’s relationship
with Brian (who made Howard look like the World’s Greatest Dad by comparison).

Most of the time it just plain made him giddy with delight, and the best way to deal when he was
suddenly overwhelmed with Bruce Appreciation was to invade his personal space with some sort of
physical display of affection.

Of course, this was totally sanctioned behavior (he’d earned the privilege), and Bruce normally
responded with a good natured, half-smothered smile, or an eye roll. Since this was an atypical day,
when Tony grabbed him and planted a big wet one on Bruce’s criminally under-kissed mouth, he
uncovered the secret of all secrets without a single word passing between them.

To an outside observer it would have looked like some sort of acting class warm up routine—
widening eyes, facial ticks, half-shrugs, smiles, a shoulder squeeze, and some nodding—but that was
the equivalent of an entire conversation for the two of them.

On another day, maybe he wouldn’t have even picked up on it, but he was still feeling the hyper
awareness that invariably went hand in hand with his panic attacks. The way Bruce tensed over the
touch of their lips, combined with the strange flash of guilt in his eyes, and the faint, lingering scent
of Natasha on his clothes all collided in Tony’s brain.

Bruce had been keeping secrets, and doing a damned fine job of it, too. Tony was impressed, and
curious, and if he was being honest with himself, even a little jealous, because he selfishly liked
thinking of Bruce as his, and now he was going to have to share with someone capable of killing him
in his sleep without waking James in the process.

Knowing Natasha, it wasn’t surprising that she’d wanted to keep things on the QT, but they were
still living in a household full of sneaky, sometimes terrifyingly observant people, and had managed
to keep this under wraps from everyone, including Clint, which was big.

“My lips are sealed,” Tony swore solemnly, crossing his heart. If Nat wanted to keep it a secret, he’d
be damned if he ran his mouth. He had enough problems as it was. “But, ah, congrats?”

Bruce ducked his head adorably, and cleared his throat. “Thanks.”
“Say, look, a baby brain.” Tony pointed to the displays, happy for the diversion. Bruce gave him a grateful smile, slid his glasses back onto his face, and started scanning the readouts.

“The brain waves look as expected for his age range,” Bruce murmured, “I’m seeing typical organization…”

Tony rubbed his palms against his closed eyes, as if he could push away the fatigue. “This is going to be inconclusive, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.” Bruce suddenly sounded intrigued, which was always (well, almost always) a good thing. “Just then, when you were talking… Say something again?”

“Something,” Tony said. “Sorry, that wasn’t helpful. Huh, look at that. Was his brain lighting up like that before?”

“Not so much.”

“Look at him go, making dopamine and norepinephrine like a little champ,” Tony murmured, smiling over at Steve. “Considering what you signed up for back in the day, I guess it’s no surprise that you’re happy being a lab rat, huh Cap?”

“I think something else is going on,” Bruce said, staring at Steve thoughtfully. “Let’s see what happens when you leave the room.”

That awful sinking feeling was returning, but Tony did as asked. Sure enough, as soon as he was out of the room he heard Steve going off with all the urgency of a fire alarm and headed back in. “Please tell me you poked him with something sharp and shiny while I was gone.”

Steve sniffled, his sobs trailing off, even as he gave a forlorn little wail. Unable to help himself, Tony placed a hand against the top of his head, stroking the silky blond hair as if Steve was a cat. He had a momentary image of himself as some cheesy super villain, all, “And now you die, Mr. Bond,” while holding a tricked out super serum baby.

Oblivious to the weird cul de sac Tony’s thoughts had wound up in, Steve was all contentment, the pleasure center of his brain flashing across the displays like it was a Lite-Brite.

“Well,” Bruce removed his glasses and leaned back against the edge of the exam table, “all signs point to ‘normal baby brain,’ except that he seems to experience extreme levels of stress and discomfort when you’re absent.” He used his glasses to point to Steve’s happily glowing nucleus accumbens, adding, “On the bright side, there’s a strong positive response when you’re present, especially when speaking, or interacting with him.”

Guilt hit Tony like a blow to the solar plexus, catching him off guard, and leaving him confused. He hadn’t actually done anything wrong, and it certainly wasn’t like he wanted Steve to be fixated on him. So why was his first reaction to ask Bruce to keep this particular discovery just between the two of them?

“So, what, I’m like Cap-nip?”

Bruce shrugged. “Seems to be the case.” Tony rubbed his temple, if only to have something to do with his hand. It was also an excuse to partially hide his face, not that it did any good. Bruce was too observant, and far too well versed in the secret language of Tony Stark to not pick up on his current weird headspace.

“I’m guessing you and James never discussed…”
“What?” Tony interrupted, cringing over how defensive he sounded. “Nothing to talk about, is there, because nothing happened, except I got over a stupid crush.” Steve burbled, hands reaching up to grab hold of Tony’s wrist. “Exactly, thank you. What good could possibly come from telling him?”

Bruce said nothing at all, seemingly content to wait Tony out.

“I’m supposed to just bring it up one night, like, hey, wanna hear something funny?” Tony covered Steve’s ears with his hands, and hissed, “I used to jerk off thinking about your best friend. A lot. I’m sure that won’t make anything weird, considering we live and work with the guy.”

Bruce winced. “Fair enough.”

“It’s ancient history, and more importantly this has fuck all to do with our current problem.”

“I agree.”

Tony stared at him, confused, upset, and uncomfortable. “So why bring it up?”

“Because you needed to me to confirm for you that what’s happening right now is not your fault, Tony. We’re dealing with magic.” Bruce gave a shrug. “Anything goes.”

Tony let out the breath he’d been holding, relief washing through him. Bruce was right. Telling himself was one thing, hearing it from someone he trusted was another. He knew he was over Steve, had been for ages, but that didn’t mean he’d stopped loving the guy, it’d just shifted into something healthier.

They were friends, partners, brothers in arms. Steve was the Dad to Tony’s Mom, the two of them sharing a closeness that went hand in hand with overseeing The Avengers. All of that was good, great even, and totally appropriate.

But then there was the rest of it, little unresolved things that he still struggled with periodically, like the fact that through no fault of his own Steve had haunted Tony’s relationship with his father. By the age of four he’d already figured out Howard would never love him even half as much as he did Captain America.

And then there was all of the inappropriate shit he didn’t think about anymore, but was still there in the back of his mind somewhere. Steve had no idea that when he was growing up Tony tended to vacillate wildly between hero worship and hatred. It only got worse when puberty had shown up to the party like some asshole bearing gifts of tequila and blow, which (despite being a good time in his experience) was just asking for trouble.

There was a reason why blond and blue eyed had been his type for so long. Back in the day, if anyone had lifted up the Einstein poster he kept taped above his bed, they’d have found it hid a collection of stolen photos and other Captain America memorabilia that served as inspiration for his masstabatury fantasies.

All of which was exceedingly creepy to think about considering Steve was currently stuck as a one year old, and was keeping himself amused by trying to eat Tony’s watch.

“What if I’m harboring a secret desire to have Captain America love me, and this is the end result?” Tony kept his eyes averted. “That’s the sort of double-edged nonsense that goes hand in hand with magic, right?”

“You could just as easily speculate that Steve has been harboring a secret desire to have less responsibility,” Bruce pointed out. “Not everything is your fault, Tony.”
Steve stopped chewing on the watch long enough to agree with Bruce. “Thanks, kiddo.”

With a sigh, Tony began removing the electrodes, Steve beaming at him in appreciation as he did so. “Since this is a safe space, I’m going to go ahead and admit that I’ve been feeling suspiciously, ah, comfortable with this, since… Well, since picking him up. Before that I was having the freak out to end all freak outs.”

"Sometimes the fear of something is worse than the reality. Besides, he is kind of cute like this.”

Tony scooped Steve up into his arms, and swallowed around his guilt, because the baby Steve snuggles were growing on him in a big way. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m still absolutely terrified he’s going to stay this way. He’s probably infected me with some kind of magical parenting compulsion.”

Bruce just smiled at him, and shook his head. “I can scan you, if you want.” His tone made it clear Tony was building mountains out of molehills, as he tended to do, so Tony let it go with yet another sigh.

“I hate magic, Bruce.”

Bruce gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder. “I know. Me too.”

**Chapter 5**

"You've got a sick sense of humor, Potts."

Pepper smiled as she held up the little Captain America onesie, not even bothering to hide her maniacal glee.

"You're supposed to use your powers for good."

"Oh, come on, Tony," she complained, "it's cute."

"This is a nightmare, not cute. Not. Cute." Pepper rolled her eyes. "I'm serious, Pep, I get that he's adorable, but no one can know what's happened. Not even Happy."

"I've been keeping your secrets for years, Tony, I know how this works."

She tucked a strand of her hair behind an ear, and it made his chest hurt a little. Yeah, he was definitely emotionally raw and running on fumes if Pepper playing with her hair had him about to burst into tears.

"I know. I'm sorry, I trust you, Pepper, this is just..." He shrugged, and had to fight the impulse to put his head in her lap. "Thanks."

"It's all going to work out, you'll see," and the odd thing was, Pepper made it sound true.

Steve blew a raspberry at her, kicking vehemently as she attempted to wrestle him into the inappropriately themed baby-wear. Just in case she had any doubts as to his opinion, he gave a little baby shout that unfortunately lacked all of Captain America's umph.

"Be nice, Pepper brought you diapers," Tony's attention was suddenly divided as James arrived, out
of uniform and scrubbed clean. "You've insulted him," he explained to her absently.

Tony could tell James had been crying, but on the upside it must have helped, because he looked more himself, the cold distance apparently having been shed along with the tears and his uniform. Tony had wanted to help with that part; a little film reel wherein they cried together and then fucked in the shower (which in turn miraculously made everything all better) had been whirring along in his head since their kiss in the elevator.

James approached cautiously, some strange expression in his eyes as he watched them. It was chased away a moment later by surprise when Steve let out a happy whoop upon spotting him.

Pepper smiled and began tickling Steve’s tummy. "Someone's happy to see Bucky, isn't he? Isn't he?"

"Bu bu," Steve said, slapping away Pepper's hands, deeply offended by being talked down to.

"Hey," James said, managing a tight smile. “Pepper,” he added with a nod.

“Look how cute,” Pepper said, holding up the outfit.

James's face clouded over at the sight of the onesie, and Tony wanted to lick away the little furrow between his brows. "Please don't put him in that."

Pepper rolled her eyes and tossed the outfit aside, handing the bags of goodies off to Tony. "You two are no fun." She got up, smoothed down her skirt, dropped a kiss to Steve's forehead, and then grabbed her purse.

"Whoa, hey," Tony protested, up on his feet in an instant. "Don't you want to, I don't know, babysit?"

Pepper gave him the look, and he knew he was shit out of luck. "I'm in the middle of negotiations, you know that. Besides, you seem to be doing just fine."

"I'm not, honest, it's the total opposite. Any minute now I'll break him, or scar him for life."

"Tony," Pepper gave him a kiss on the cheek, saying his name in that way she had, all loaded with feeling and admonishment and affectionate frustration. "He’s practically indestructible, and he probably won't remember any of this once he's back to normal, anyway."

“You say that now…”

“Bye bye, little itty bitty Steve," Pepper waved to Steve, gave James a smile, and beat a hasty retreat.

"He's great at negotiations," Tony called after her. "Bringing a baby is a power move. They won't know how to react!"

"Try to have fun," she answered, grinning evilly as she got in the elevator. "And take a picture if you put him in the outfit."

James pulled his hair back and up, twisting it into a little knot before caving in to Steve’s urgent wiggling. Steve immediately switched into happy overdrive as soon as James had a hold of him. "Bu bu," he said again, the picture of contentment.

Something shifted in James's expression, a tension easing as Steve began telling him about the crazy day he'd been having. “Huh. He’s not screaming. This is an improvement.”
"Oh," and Tony was not disappointed by his sudden revelation, that was relief he was feeling. If the baby Steve love wasn’t exclusive to him, it backed up the notion that this wasn’t somehow his fault. "For some reason, he didn't recognize you before. Interesting. Hey, JARVIS, let Bruce know?"

"Of course, sir."

James didn’t look particularly comforted by this revelation as he sank down onto the couch next to Tony. "Where is everybody?"

"Bruce is in the lab, Thor still isn't back, I sent Nat to talk to Sam in person, and Clint is liaising with Coulson."

He fished around in the bags Pepper had left, pulling out a Thor onesie that even had a little cape. Potts had definitely gone over to the dark side, which was a shame; he didn't think the Avengers could take her down, even when Cap once again met the minimum height requirement for battling the forces of evil.

Underneath all of the Avengers merchandise (and seriously, how was there nothing representing Iron Man in the entire bag?) he found some typical boring baby clothes, and pulled them out. He and James teamed up, and before he could wiggle too much or protest, they had Steve dressed, little socks and all. The two of them stared at each other, while Steve burbled away happily.

"Kay, I’ll say it. This is strangely okay. Is it strangely okay for you?"

James worried at his lower lip, bouncing Steve on his lap, that little furrow back between his brows. "I want my best friend back. But... I am feeling slightly less like the world is ending."

Tony exhaled shakily, because yes, that was it, that was exactly how he was feeling. Unable to help himself, he grabbed hold of James's face and kissed him, somewhat surprised to be kissed back with such enthusiastic desperation.

Steve gurgled and smacked at them with tiny fists, trying to break it up, and James actually growled his displeasure when Tony pulled away. He was all hungry bedroom eyes, and Tony had to fight the impulse to ask JARVIS to watch Steve while they went off somewhere private.

"You and Bruce figure anything out?"

“Just that I’m causing some sort of happy chemical cocktail in Cap’s brain, which seems like something we now have in common.” James frowned at this. "How’re you holding up?"

When he answered, it was in Russian, which was a pretty good way to keep Steve out of the conversation. "Not great, but I’m keeping it together." He eyed the baby in his lap warily, as if he might explode at any minute. "You seem... better."

And there was the guilt, right on schedule. "Look, earlier, I know I let you down—please believe me when I say I’m painfully aware of what a dick move that was—and, uh, yeah, I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry. You needed me, and I was too busy worrying about me to help you. Not my finest moment."

James's mouth trembled, and it was difficult not to fill up the silence with more apologetic babbling, but Tony waited instead, ready to listen, and accept the criticism he so justly deserved.

"I thought Steve was dead," he finally said. "There was the explosion, and the freaky light show, and I couldn't see him anywhere. Just kept thinking, 'how can I help him if I can't find him?' This isn't... ideal. But at least he's alive. We're all alive."
Tony curled a hand around the nape of James's neck, stroking the soft skin there, an attempt to comfort. "I know."

James turned to face him, all sad, lost eyes. "I'm not mad you, Antoshka. I was disappointed and kinda angry in the moment, but I understand why it happened."

And just like that, Tony’s own eyes were tearing up again, so that James wavered momentarily, as if he was a mirage. "Yeah?" was all he could manage.

"I saw the way your hands were shaking. You needed to deal with that, and as soon as you could, you came back."

Tony sighed. Of course James had forgiven him, but that didn’t matter. It’d still be a long time before he forgave himself. They should be able to count on each other no matter what, and that hadn’t been the case, not even close. Tony never wanted to be responsible for that disappointed look haunting James’s face ever again.

"Yeah, well, thanks for that, but I never should have left in the first place."

James gave him a sad smile. “Can’t change the past, can only learn from it.”

Steve whined, fingers fumbling at James's mouth, a feeble attempt to get him speaking English again.

"Sorry, buddy," Tony said, pulling Steve onto his lap, "this is for adult ears only."

James watched (that strange expression was back on his face) as Tony stood Steve up, his tiny feet braced against Tony’s knees. He kept hold of him under the armpits while Steve lectured him about how rude it was to talk about someone when they were right there and couldn’t understand what you were saying.

"Don’t try to guilt trip me. I'm going to have to change your diapers at some point, so I think I'm entitled to some private grown up talk with James, rude or not."

“Yeah, well, thanks for that, but I never should have left in the first place.""
Tony worried. James was staring at Steve, pretty mouth turned down in a frown. “Steve could’ve been hers,” he finally said, “and seeing the three of you together…”

“What?”

Tony watched James’s mouth anxiously, scared and uncertain, so distracted by the way his teeth nervously worried at his lower lip that it made him jerk with surprise when he finally spoke.

“Is this something you wanted?”

“Are you seriously asking me if I wanted Steve to get exploded back into infancy? Because I did not wish for this, if…”

“No, not—Tony. I meant when you were with Pepper, or… anyone? A family. Kids.”

“Oh.” And now Tony just felt stupid, because suddenly it was painfully obvious that James was worried, was maybe scared shitless that the answer was yes. “Wow, no, not even a little,” he answered in a rush, “hence all the running away to have a panic attack earlier. I’m pretty sure the only reason I’m not puking with terror at the moment is that I’m in shock or something.”

James exhaled loudly, the tension leaving his body, a strained smile on his face. “Thank fuck,” he said in English, and then they were laughing. Tony wasn’t even sure why it was so funny, but soon his sides were aching, tears were running down his face, and he and James were sort of hunched together and shaking, each with a hand on Steve so he didn’t roll onto the floor.

“I thought,” he struggled to get the words out, “we weren’t allowed to curse in front of the kid?”

James swiped his sleeve across his face to dry it off, and shrugged. “Fuck it, Steve can out-curse us any day, and we know it.”

“Fair point.”

The person in question was watching them all wide eyed and curious, as if worried something had gone horribly wrong with their brains. “Don’t worry, Small Wonder, we’re still fit for duty.”

“What’re the chances we wake up tomorrow and he’s back to normal?” James asked wistfully, and just like that Tony didn’t feel quite so much like laughing.

“Yeah, not putting money on us getting that lucky.” Tony set Steve down on the floor, watched as he wobbled on his feet, and wasn’t even a little surprised when he took off toddling a moment later.

“He can walk?” and Tony didn’t think it was his imagination that James sounded incredibly disturbed by this revelation.

“Apparently?”

With a world weary sigh, James stood and began following Steve as he staggered around like a little drunk. “Take a look around, Tony. All of your furniture is either glass with sharp edges, or something heavy just waiting to be knocked over. Or covered with choking hazards!”

“Ah…”

James leaned over and snatched up a throwing knife with a candy bar wrapper stuck to it just as Steve reached for it. He held it up and glared accusingly.

“Okay, that’s Clint’s, not mine, and I generally don’t keep track of what birdbrain leaves lying
“Neither does Clint,” James snapped, and as if to prove his point, he reached behind a nearby lamp and pulled out a gun still adorned with duct tape. “We’ve all been hiding ‘just in case’ weapons in here for ages. You can’t just let him wander around!”

“Wait, hold on, I haven’t been hiding weapons, I don’t see Thor hiding weapons, or Bruce, or…”

"Right, you and Bruce just leave experiments lying around."

"That was one time!" Tony shot to his feet, not that it helped much, as James still had the height advantage. “And wait a minute, why is this my fault again? Was I supposed to—for no practical reason whatsofuckingever—spontaneously baby proof the super hero clubhouse in all of my free time?”

James took a step towards him, his hands raised as if he was going to start ticking his various counterpoints off with his fingers, when Steve started shrieking and derailed the argument entirely.

"Alright, it's okay," James sighed, looking appropriately abashed, but Steve did his best attempt at a dash when James went to pick him up, little arms flailing to help him keep his balance as he tumbled face first into Tony's shins.

This time Tony sighed (admittedly a bit overdramatically) as he stooped to pick Steve up. As soon as he did, Steve clung to him, pressing his face against Tony's chest as if to hide.

"Hey, I've got a new house rule," Tony said with all the forced cheerfulness he could muster, "no fighting in front of the baby."

Anger, irritation, longing, heartache, suspicion, shame, regret, and frustration flowed across James’s handsome features as if he was trying them on one by one, unsure of which was appropriate for the situation. When he spoke, it was clear the fight had gone out of him, leaving him looking raw and vulnerable and devastated.

"What are we supposed to do if he stays like this?" he asked quietly, as if Tony had any answers.

"I don't know."

Steve whimpered, and so Tony began rubbing circles against his back, dropped a kiss to the top of his head, and switched over to Russian.

"If you think this is fun for me, think again. Between the two of us, you've at least had something resembling a normal childhood. At the very least, it sounded like your family wanted you around. You had a family, for that matter. I don't have any points of reference, here."

James blinked at this, maybe as caught off guard by the anguish in Tony's voice as he was. He swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, and squeezed Steve a bit tighter than he needed to, not that Steve seemed to mind. "And yes, I realize how stupid and… and petty that sounds, considering the source."

"Antoshka."

Tony exhaled shakily, some of the tension leaving his body almost against his will. It did stupid things to his heart when James called him that, which made holding onto his anger difficult.

"Why are we fighting, anyway?" he asked, and the change on James’s face told Tony he had picked
up on the physical, psychological, and emotional exhaustion in Tony's voice.

James opened his mouth, presumably to apologize, but then his gaze flicked off to the side, and Tony realized they were no longer alone.

"You're fighting? But, you guys never fight? Which is totally weird, by the way, you gotta have a good fight now and then so you can have nasty makeup sex."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, and tried to focus on the genuine concern in Clint's voice rather than his words.

"Congratulations, you just volunteered to baby proof this floor of the Tower. Let JARVIS know if you need, uh, foam padding? Or... Oh, I don't know. Whatever."

"Wait, what?"

Tony shifted his grip, and Steve settled his head onto his shoulder, apparently not in the least bit interested in being put back down so he could potentially take an eye out on the corner of a table, which was fine by Tony.

"That's a serious order, by the way," Tony added, turning around so Clint could get a good look at his 'not messing around' face. "James was kind enough to point out that some of you have been jamming weapons into every available nook and cranny. Not exactly baby friendly behavior, Barton."

Clint opened his mouth, but wisely snapped it shut again after exchanging a look with James, which was just annoying.

Steve picked that moment to chime in (clearly scolding) and Tony smirked, unable to help himself. He'd lost count of the number of times he and Steve had teamed up and gone parental on Clint. It was nice to know that even in his current state, Steve still had his back.

"Thanks, Cap."

Tony stuck his tongue out at Clint, then headed for the kitchen. The kid would definitely be ready for a refuel.

"You always take his side!" Clint whined to Steve as they left.

Once he was in the kitchen, Tony was at a loss. He didn't dare set Steve down for fear he'd jump off the counter without a second thought (the guy jumped out of planes without a chute, so it was a pretty safe bet baby Steve was equally ridiculous), and the floor was right out, since he'd probably run off and arm himself with a sniper rifle he found stuffed behind the stack of old pizza boxes.

"Sir, I thought it best to wait until you were alone." JARVIS spoke softly, as if worried they'd be overheard, which could only mean one thing. And, hey, there was that sinking sensation all over again.

"It's ready then?"

"Indeed. Shall I have it sent to your quarters?"

Tony stared into Steve's (literally) baby blues as he thought about it for a moment. "No. This conversation needs to be strictly professional. Send it to Operations."
"Very well." JARVIS waited a moment, then asked, "Shall I schedule a team meeting?"

"No. I'll take care of all that, thanks, J."

Steve was looking around, trying to pinpoint the location of the person speaking, and ultimately wound up staring at the ceiling. It immediately brought to mind the first time Steve had met JARVIS; he'd had almost the exact same look on his face. It'd been adorable then, too.

"Some things never change."

Tony attempted to refocus on the task at hand, which was keeping up with a baby super soldier's metabolism. He was considering assembling something one handed, or seeing about fencing Steve off somehow, but found himself sitting down instead, suddenly too overwhelmed to stay on his feet.

He'd probably been staring at the wall for a good two minutes by the time Steve gave him a comforting pat to the cheek, effectively bringing him back from la la land. "Sorry. Right. Food. I hope you realize you're shaving years off my life with this crap."

And because the universe apparently had it in for him, when he looked back up again Tony almost dropped Steve in shock as he realized they were no longer alone.

"Gah!"

Loki smiled wickedly. "Stark. Eloquent as ever."

The rest he couldn't make out over Steve's wailing.

**Chapter 6**

"My my," and Tony struggled not to rush over in order to insert himself between Loki and Steve, "it seems I owe you an apology, brother. This truly is too good to be missed."

"Loki," Thor rumbled in warning, probably more out of habit than anything else. He didn't actually seem particularly bothered as far as Tony could tell. "What can you glean?"

Loki rolled his eyes, his hands beginning to glow where they were poised above Steve. Tony still wasn't sure whether or not Loki was physically there, or if this was one of his projections, but either way it went against all of his instincts to just sit there and let him examine Steve.

A shared glance with his teammates showed he wasn't alone in his discomfort. He wondered if they'd be in any position to put a stop to it if Loki decided to take advantage of the temporary truce in order to snatch up the currently conveniently portable Steve Rogers in order to sell him off to the highest bidder.

Tony wasn't sure if the others were thinking the same thing or not, but unsurprisingly, Clint was looking tense and a little green around the gills. Bruce was thankfully still pink (no green showing there), while James had returned to full on seriousness, positioning himself between the archer and the so called god of mischief. He also seemed poised to jump to Steve’s defense if need be.

"I'm sorry, shall I rush my examination and risk overlooking something of worth all to satisfy Thor's legendary impatience?"

"Yeah, this won't end badly at all," Tony muttered to Bruce.
"My intention is not to rush," Thor answered, and Loki apparently accepted that as an apology, because he refocused his attention on the problem at hand.

"A poorly done thing, this," he murmured.

Tony had already been stressed out, so seeing Loki expressing genuine (at least, he thought it was genuine) curiosity and distaste wasn't helping his mood in the least. Considering the source, "poorly done" could be good or bad or anything in between.

With a little 'hmph' noise, Loki straightened up, smoothing down the tunic he was wearing as he did so, eyes never leaving the tiny wriggling form of Captain America.

"Consider yourself lucky the patriot blundered into this.” His narrowed eyes sparkled with mischief as he looked to his brother. "Am I right in thinking no sign of your foe remained after the so called explosion?"

Thor folded his arms across his chest and frowned profoundly, perhaps feeling a bit defensive over the implication that he'd let an enemy escape. "You are."

Loki nodded, and shared a sickly smile with the group. It was tempting to suggest Bruce Hulk out and reintroduce his fists to Loki's face, but technically he was helping them, so...

"I thought not. Consider them dust and ash, unless they were particularly resilient, and in possession of a timeline equaling or eclipsing that of your captain."

The way Loki said 'Captain' made Tony's teeth hurt, probably because he'd reflexively clenched his jaw in order to keep his stupid mouth shut. They needed to keep Loki talking, and getting into a shouting match with him wasn't likely to help much on that front.

Worryingly, Thor now appeared curious, as did Bruce. He'd begun fidgeting in that "I've just come to a horrible conclusion" way of his.

"Timeline?" James asked since no one else seemed willing to.

Loki gestured to the baby, as if that explained everything. "A great muddling of magics is at work. Likely the fools thought to open a doorway into the past as a means of escape."

Now Bruce was definitely interested, and he wasn't the only one. Tony could feel his own thoughts taking off at full speed, his mouth opening almost against his will. "So, what, instead of traveling back in time they accidentally rewound themselves out of existence?"

Loki's tone was beyond condescending. "A rather simplistic interpretation, but in this instance a childish explanation is appropriate; we are speaking of imbeciles toying with forces far beyond their understanding."

"Have we any hope of reversing what has been done to our shield brother?"

Tony could have kissed Thor for asking. He was damned if he was opening his mouth again, and really, knowing the answer to that particular question was all that was important.

"An underlying principle of elasticity is at play here," Loki explained, looking far too pleased for Tony's comfort. He made a strange gesture over Steve, and suddenly the air around him was alive with angry tendrils of pulsing light the color of a fresh bruise. "See for yourself."

"Healing has begun already," Thor said, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "This bodes well."
Tony and Bruce exchanged glances—if it was that simple, Loki would have left as soon as he'd had a look at Steve. No way they were that lucky.

Sure enough, Loki smiled and with a flick of his wrist the light show was over. "I suppose this could be interpreted as positive, depending upon your point of view."

"Speak plainly, brother!"

Steve made a startled little noise of dismay and that was it, Tony couldn't help himself, he darted forward and snatched him back up. It'd taken a good twenty minutes to get Steve calm enough to let Loki look him over in the first place, and Tony wasn't particularly interested in a repeat performance of the Baby Steve Tantrum Extravaganza.

"Have I not made it clear this spell was cobbled together by simpletons?"

Tony held Steve a little tighter, and shared a nervous glance with James. He already hated whatever Loki planned to say next.

"Perhaps your opponents anticipated sustaining injuries during your little brawl, and, no doubt thinking themselves quite clever, attempted to weave rejuvenating properties into their means of escape. Not of much use when you've effectively eradicated your own timeline, but..."

"And what significance does this hold, brother?"

Loki tipped his head to the side as if listening to something only he could hear. The air felt strangely charged with energy as his eyes met Tony’s own for an uncomfortably long moment. As Tony watched, spellbound, a lock of dark hair slid out of place, and came to rest against one of Loki's regal, pale cheeks, seemingly moving in slow motion. It was as if the rest of the room had faded into the background, his attention entirely hijacked.

"The soldier has a peculiar relationship with time, does he not? Timing as well, I would venture."

Loki spoke conversationally, and his words didn’t seem to match the movement of his lips. Tony wondered if the rest of the room could even hear him, or heard something else entirely, if Loki was speaking directly into his head somehow.

“His body struggles against and overcomes that which ravages all living things—your kind especially—and yet, beneath it all, wounds remain, unaffected by his resiliency, unshifted by time. This incongruity lies at the heart of the matter.”

And then Loki refocused his gaze elsewhere, and Tony jerked, as if he’d been released from some form of restraint. In the absence of whatever it was Loki had been doing to him, everything suddenly sounded too loud, the lights were too bright, and he was left with a sick, crawling feeling in his guts.

Steve burbled up at him in concern, and blinking rapidly as if to clear his head, Tony looked down, found bright blue eyes watching him intently. These eyes were as captivating as Loki’s had been, and Tony found he couldn’t quite look away.

Deciphering Loki’s annoying Dungeons & Dragons Doublespeak, Tony decided he was more or less implying that the spell Steve stumbled into had, in addition to rewinding his clock, interacted in some way with the healing properties of the serum, causing some sort of conflict.

Which made some sort of stupid magical bullshit sense. If Steve had simply (ha!) travelled back through his own timeline, he should currently have a slew of health issues. Instead, Tony had himself an armful of extremely healthy baby. He supposed he should be grateful.
"To answer your question, brother, as it stands your precious little sentinel of liberty is the only one capable of reversing what has been done to him."

"Wait, Steve has to fix this?" Clint blurted. "But he’s a baby!"

"As are you all, by my way of thinking," Loki answered, lip curled in a sneer.

Thor took several steps closer to his brother, perhaps worried they’d all spontaneously decide to pile on him in order to work out their exasperation. "Can we not assist in some manner?"

"Physically, he is perfection. It is a deeper wound he must heal in this form, and as I said, this task is his alone to undertake."

Thor's eyes widened slightly, and Tony had the distinct impression he'd come to some conclusion that was eluding the rest of them. "And if he fails to do so before the tears in time surrounding him have healed?"

Loki smiled, and Tony wanted to throw up. "He'll remain in this form, and go about his return to adulthood in the typical fashion."

"Okay, let me just…" Tony shifted his grip on Steve, and tried to swallow down his panic. "So you're saying Steve has some sort of of spirit quest he needs to complete, and if he succeeds he snaps back to normal, but if he doesn't, the change is permanent?"

Loki arched an eyebrow by way of answering.

"Does he know this?" Tony was beginning to sound hysterical and he knew it, but didn't particularly care. "Because it seems like he's only operating with baby logic at the moment."

Then James was there beside him, a hand on his shoulder as if to hold him back, which was when Tony realized he had taken several steps forward and was shaking (he wasn’t sure if it was with anger or fear). He sighed in relief as James took Steve off his hands, allowing him to fold his arms across his chest and focus on evening out his breathing.

Loki watched the three of them with narrowed eyes, then turned to his brother and began speaking in some language Tony had no hope of understanding. He wondered if this was their native tongue, or from some other realm entirely. Either way, it boiled down to a strained conversation between the brothers that ended with Loki winking out of existence.

" Seriously?" Tony and Clint shouted at the same time.

Thor made a dismissive hand gesture, and seemed oblivious to the rest of the room staring at him expectantly. "My brother refused to say more on the matter," he announced solemnly, but Tony got the distinct impression he was lying.

Beside him, Steve was already whimpering and attempting to twist out of James’s grasp. Apparently, he was still at the top of the People Baby Steve Approves Of list.

Tony felt like the weight of the world was pressing down on him, his limbs heavy, his thoughts spiralling off course, hearing Loki’s words in his head again, and again—return to adulthood in the typical fashion.

Unfortunately, it didn’t matter whether or not they understood the mechanics of what was happening, because the only person equipped to solve their problem was currently back in diapers, and probably in need of more mashed banana.
Tony ignored the chatter around him as the group began discussing the implications of Loki's bombshell, opting instead to grab the bags Pepper had left behind. Digging around, he eventually found the baby carrier, yanked it out, strapped it on, and stalked over to James.

"Steve me," he ordered, ignoring the crazy looks everyone was giving him.

With a tight frown, James did as was asked, and then helped Tony make some adjustments until Steve was effectively secured. At least now he'd have his hands free.

"Okay, people, this place isn't going to baby proof itself. Bruce, if you don't mind, help Clint out with that? James, I need you to handle our suite. JARVIS, we're going to need a super soldier proof crib ASAP."

"Of course, sir."

Steve babbled happily, apparently living vicariously through Tony; if he couldn't be the one issuing orders, at least he could be strapped to the person who was. "Cap needs to eat again, which I'll handle. Thor, you're with me."

There was a moment where no one moved, and James watched him, his expression ominous. Tony wished the situation was different, but this was the hand they'd been dealt, and at the moment he didn't have the luxury of treating James differently than any of the other Avengers.

"Want me to order food?" Clint asked, and to Tony's absolute relief, he began moving, started fishing under the couch and pulling out pistols.

"Absolutely."

Clint gave a snappy salute, and Tony could have kissed him. "Consider it done, Mom."

Before heading to the elevator, James gave him a nod and a tight smile, his eyes speaking volumes, and Tony relaxed just the slightest bit. He hoped his gratitude was obvious.

"Okay, squirt, let's get you fed."

Much to Tony's relief, Thor pitched in once they were in the kitchen. He was a much better cook in Tony's opinion.

"With Steve out of commission, it all falls to me," he explained softly. "Which means I need to know what else Loki told you."

It was obvious Thor was less than comfortable with the request, but he seemed to understand the position Tony was in.

"I know not the solution to our friend's dilemma," he answered hesitantly. "Loki and I spoke of the bonds of love."

Tony suddenly found himself incredibly interested in examining the leftovers he'd found in the fridge. "Love, huh?"

Guilt churned through him once again as he thought of the years spent longing over someone way, way out of his league. He should have known Bruce was going to be wrong. Somehow this was going to wind up being his fault, and he'd have to apologize to the group for fucking them all over. That never got old.
"Whilst conferring, my brother made it known Steven’s thoughts are that of any child's."

"Great." Tony grimaced. "So, what, whatever's going on with him, vacationing as a baby is supposed to help?"

"The heart and mind are often in conflict, are they not?"

"Sure, but..."

"Were things not simpler in childhood? Our parents dote upon us, responsibility is not felt so keenly, and we look upon the world as an adventure."

Tony stared, knew he was staring. That didn't sound like any childhood he'd experienced. Before now, it hadn't actually occurred to him that someone might want to be a kid again. That was straight up nightmare fuel, as far as he was concerned.

"As it stands, of all our number, only yourself and James are remembered by Steven."

That Steve would remember Bucky Barnes made some sort of odd sense to Tony. They loved each other pretty fiercely, so much so that seeing Steve again had been enough of a catalyst to derail HYDRA’s’s brainwashing. It was the other bit that had him confused, the part where he was worth remembering.

“Any idea why?”

Thor squirmed—there really wasn’t another word for it, and Tony was pretty sure he’d never seen the big guy squirm before—before answering. “Loki did not say. It is my belief that only through your love and support will our shield brother succeed, and return to his true form."

Tony nodded, not trusting himself to speak right away. He'd felt the weight of that responsibility right from the moment he'd looked into Steve's eyes on the battlefield. He'd run from Bruce's lab in an attempt to distance himself from the truth, but there was no point in running now, not if he wanted their lives back to normal.

"Loki didn’t happen to, I dunno, mention how long we have before Steve is stuck like this?"

Thor hummed thoughtfully as he took the food away from Tony, which was good, considering he was making a mess of it. "There is no way to be certain, but one might observe the wounds in time surrounding him, and postulate."

Tony ran his hands through his hair, then down over his face, and tried to ignore the hectic drumming of his heart. His back already ached from all the baby lugging he'd been doing, his eyes felt like they'd had sand rubbed in them, and he wasn't even close to being able to call it a day.

He wanted a shower, and a drink, and the freedom to go upstairs, shove James against a wall, and kiss him until he was dizzy with it. He wanted to hide his face against that warm, broad chest and cry until he ran out of tears, try to find a way to apologize for somehow unintentionally ruining their lives, and...

He took a ragged breath, and purposefully reigned in his thoughts. When he next spoke to James, it wouldn't be a conversation either of them wanted to have, and he'd be lucky if he didn't get punched in the mouth, considering how tightly wound they both were at the moment.

Tony sighed, sucked in another deep breath, and buried his nose in Steve's soft, blond hair. He still smelled the same, which was strange, as well as strangely comforting. He’d assumed babies came
pre-loaded with that baby smell, but maybe you had to actually use baby products on a kid before that happened.

Feeling slightly more centered, he set to brewing a pot of coffee.

"Hey, would you mind confabbing with Bruce? We're going to need to see about creating some sort of monitoring device, if that's even possible, and it sounds like you have more experience with timespace tears than either of us."

Thor clasped his shoulder, and now it was Tony’s turn to squirm.

"I see plainly the turn your thoughts have taken, and feel I must not remain silent. Whatever has transpired is no fault of yours. You have risen to the occasion, more so than any of us."

"I don't..."

Tony bit down hard into his lower lip to stop the words waiting to spill out of his stupid, traitorous mouth. There was no way to explain to this man that he didn't really have a choice when it came to blaming himself. Years of Howard using Captain America as yardstick and reminding Tony of all the ways in which he didn't measure up meant he was conditioned to think of the guy as infallible. The idea that, between the two of them, this would wind up being Steve's fault and none of his was like trying to convince himself that hydrogen contained two negatively charged electrons.

"I have faith in you, Anthony."

It was so entirely unexpected, caught Tony so totally off guard, that he could only stare, and blink, and try desperately not to begin sobbing in front of the demigod.

"Thanks. That, uh, that means a lot," he said when he finally trusted his voice enough to speak.

Thor studied him for a moment, then nodded, adding, “I shall speak with Bruce upon finishing here.”

“Good.”

Tony focused on watching the coffee pot slowly fill, pushing down the tidal wave of emotions threatening to drown him, and wondered if anything would ever feel normal again.

**Chapter 7**

Tony sat in the semi-darkness of Operations, drumming his fingers nervously against the arc reactor while watching a video feed of his friends all eating dinner together. It was almost funny how the loneliness washing over him was comfortably familiar. The only thing missing was a tumbler of scotch and a good buzz, and it’d be just like old times.

“You still feel this isolation most of the time, don’t you?” Tony swiveled in his chair, found Steve watching him solemnly. It didn’t matter whether Steve understood or not, because Tony already knew the answer. “Yeah you do.”

With a sigh, he turned off the feed, and faced Steve fully. “No point in putting this off any longer. I’m counting on you to hold up your half of the bargain, okay?”

Steve gave him the baby equivalent of a pep talk, clapping his hands against Tony’s face at the end, which he was going to have to accept as agreement.
Tony knew he was stalling. He’d kept Rhodey on the line for a good twenty minutes, making sure it was clear he needed to be on standby while successfully avoiding explaining why. He trusted his lines of communication to be properly encrypted, but this was too big a secret to risk even an infinitesimal chance at a leak.

Now, there was no one else to call, and really, no matter how long he sat there, nothing was going to make what had to happen next any easier.

“Hey JARVIS, send Nat and James up.”

“Very well, sir.”

Tony scrubbed a hand over his face, took a fortifying swig of coffee, and then scooped up Steve and headed for the elevator. “Remember. Half an hour, and then I’ll be back down for you.”

While they stood there waiting Tony began babbling.

“When you’re all grown up again, any time you feel this way, you find me. We’ll come up with a codeword, like, I dunno, Ozymandias or something, and you just say that, and I’ll know, and we don’t even have to talk about it if you don’t want. I don’t care if I have to fly halfway around the fucking world, Steve, I’ll come, alright?”

Steve sounded sad when he said, “onn,” which Tony had come to understand was an attempt at saying his name. Unable to help himself, he gave the kid a kiss on the forehead before the elevator doors opened, and then shoved everything he was feeling down, down, down.

Just like old times.

James and Natasha wore identical concerned expressions, and Tony almost lost the tenuous grip on his controlled facade when he realized James had put together a plate of food for him, and brought it along.

“Sorry to interrupt dinner,” Tony began, stepping into the elevator before either of them could exit. “Natasha, you’re actually heading back down with Steve.”

She arched a perfect eyebrow at him, eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Am I?”

“You are.” He met her gaze head on, and watched the subtle shift that told him she’d figured out this wasn’t just a ploy to have some alone time with James. “Spangles here has sworn on a stack of bibles that he will not burst your eardrums.”

Steve still looked incredibly forlorn as Tony handed him over, his lower lip quivering dangerously, and his eyes bright with unshed tears. “Half an hour,” Tony reminded him, mussing up his hair.

Before he lost his nerve, Tony stepped back out of the elevator, motioning for James to follow him. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see Natasha mouth, “good luck,” and to give Steve a wave goodbye.

When he turned back around, he almost walked into the back of James, who had stopped halfway into the room.

“What’s that doing here?” he asked, his voice cracking halfway through the sentence.

“You know why it's here.”
James whirled to face him, and it took every last ounce of Tony’s self control to stand his ground. James was furious, but it was more than that, so much more. It was anguish, and misery, and watching James’s heart break in front of his eyes. Tony could hear James struggling to keep his breathing under control as he wiped hurriedly at his face, pushing aside a tear that had managed to escape, giving a little negative shake of his head.

“No. No way.”

Tony took a step closer, stomach clenching as James took one back, maintaining the physical distance between them. He’d thought James had been upset earlier, but that had only been the tip of the iceberg. This was… He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen him like this.

“No fucking way, Stark.” A strangled, miserable noise escaped James’s mouth before he could clamp down on the sound. "You can't ask me to do this!"

Tony flinched. There was no pretending that didn’t hurt. He ducked his head, a small, humorless laugh escaping. With a resigned shrug, he swallowed around the lump in his throat. When he looked back up, James was staring at him almost as if he was a stranger.

“Yeah, thing is, I wasn’t asking.”

James hurled Tony’s dinner across the room (he’d already forgotten all about the food), the plate shattering (a tinkling, almost pleasant sounding cascade of broken glass skittering across the floor) when it collided with the wall. He couldn’t stop himself from wincing, and quickly shoved his shaking hands into his pockets; he refused to look and see how bad the mess was, stared at his shoes instead.

Tony wasn’t sure what was worse—that his stomach rumbled with interest over how good the food smelled, or the memory it dredged up of being seven years old and having his father hurl a criminally expensive bottle of single-malt at his head. It’d only hit the wall because he’d managed to step out of the way at the last second. He had a scar, actually, a tiny white line marking the hand he’d reflexively raised to protect his face; it’d been sliced open by the glass ricochet.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, suddenly terrified that when he opened them again he’d find the same look in James’s eyes that he’d seen in his father's; disapproval, disgust, disappointment. Howard Stark’s patented blend.

Seeing it would mark the beginning of the end. Even if he apologized, and they worked through this unexpected mess they’d found themselves stuck in the middle of, he’d never be able to unsee or unfeel.

It would haunt him, just like it had with Steve.

Maybe he didn’t have as good a grip on his mask of indifference as he’d thought, because when he opened his eyes again he’d find the same look in James's eyes that he'd seen in his father's; disapproval, disgust, disappointment. Howard Stark’s patented blend.

Seeing it would mark the beginning of the end. Even if he apologized, and they worked through this unexpected mess they’d found themselves stuck in the middle of, he’d never be able to unsee or unfeel.

It would haunt him, just like it had with Steve.

Maybe he didn’t have as good a grip on his mask of indifference as he’d thought, because when he opened his eyes and looked up again expecting the worst, James was wearing an expression Tony couldn’t quite identify.

Unlike when he was seven, he didn’t have time to step out of the way, but it didn’t matter, because James wasn’t lashing out.

With a huff of surprise, the air was squeezed out of Tony’s lungs by the arms wrapping tightly around him, and for a strange, surreal moment he struggled against the embrace, not sure what was happening. Then James’s mouth was against his, hot, demanding, and tasting like tears.

“I love you,” James insisted angrily, and Tony could only gasp, and shudder, and hold on for dear
life. Strong hands cradled his face, holding him in place, and Tony groaned, every nerve ending alive and hungry, his eyes wide as James kissed him. “I’ll never stop, Antoshka,” he growled, biting down painfully into Tony’s lower lip. “Even when I’m furious.” Another of those vicious, possessive kisses. “When are you going to believe me?”

“I do,” Tony swore, hardly recognizing his own voice. “I do, I’m sorry…”

“Shut up,” James hissed, not giving him much of a choice in the matter, tongue insinuating its way between Tony’s lips.

Just like that, Tony was hard, blood pumping fiercely south, and he clung to James, sucked on his tongue, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and arched against him. Hands slid down his back to cup his ass, and then James was half carrying, half dragging him over to the table.

Tony huffed as he was thrown against the hard surface, the weight of James’s body pressing down on him so he couldn’t quite seem to catch his breath. He was all heat, and solid muscle, immovable, rocking the thick outline of his hard cock against Tony’s hip.

With practiced ease, James managed to unbutton Tony's pants one handed, the cool metal of his fingers against Tony's skin making him break out in gooseflesh. His body sang yes, yes, yes! This—connection and pleasure and love and James—was what he'd been aching for ever since seeing the man's body tossed through the air like a rag doll. The confirmation of life, the chance to kiss every lingering bruise, to feel James's heartbeat against his skin.

With a shudder, he tore his mouth away from James's, writhing beneath the weight of him, thrusting into the deliciously tight fist wrapped around his cock almost against his will. With an angry groan, Tony banged the back of his head against the table several times, thoughts spiralling out of control, responsibility warring with desire.

“James,” he cried piteously. Beside him, Captain America’s shield caught the light in the room, reflecting strange, colorful patterns onto the ceiling. “We shouldn’t… can’t. Not right now.”

Teeth bit painfully into the curve of his shoulder, and Tony hissed with pleasure. Despite his words, his hips hadn't stopped their movement, body already screaming for release.

The only problem was the timer ticking down in his mind. He'd told Steve half an hour, and considering their situation, he didn't dare let him down. Thor had made it clear—Steve was counting on them to get through this.

Summoning the last of his willpower, he grabbed James's shoulders and shoved hard. The face poised above his own was heartbroken, wounded, but he released Tony, pushed up and off but not quite away, not yet.

"I only have nineteen minutes before I have to be back downstairs," Tony apologized. He stroked the side of James's face, distracted by his frown, by the ruddy color his lips had turned from their kissing. "This is Avengers business. I want to—believe me I want to—but it has to take precedence. I promised Steve."

James closed his eyes and exhaled sharply, his breath hot against Tony's face. “You heard Loki. Anyone else, and we’d be planning a funeral. None of us know how much time we have left.”

"This is important," Tony added unnecessarily once James was looking at him again.

"Antoshka," James whispered, sad blue eyes searching Tony's for something, "This is important, too, and you’re not listening. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."
That should have been a nice thing to hear, except it dumped ice water into Tony's veins. James sounded hesitant, almost like he was asking a question, or... or as if a huge 'but' was about to follow.

Like maybe, I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but not if we have to raise my best friend together.

But not if Steve's well being will always take precedence over our relationship.

But I don't think you'd make a good father.

Tony was scared and confused, pushing the hair back from James's face so as to see him better.

"Did you change your mind?"

And that... was not what he'd been expecting to hear, not in the least. It made no sense.

"Wait, hold on," Tony begged, wriggling around until he was out from under James. He hastily buttoned up his pants and tried to reign in his chaotic thoughts. "Change my mind about what?"

James slid off of the table and into one of the chairs, slumping over, head in his hands. After a moment, he lifted his chin, let Tony look into his red rimmed eyes, face firm with resignation.

"Tony, you've taken me out on five ridiculously overblown dates this month." He sighed, rubbed a hand across his face. "At first, it was kinda funny how hard you were trying. And, you know what, after that balloon ride picnic debacle I figured I'd just ask you instead." James cleared his throat, "So I made some plans of my own, but halfway through Round Four of you trying to propose, it suddenly occurred to me that maybe you weren't going through with it for a reason. Deep down, are you still not sure about us?"

Tony's mouth was hanging open in shock and confusion. He was livid, arousal long since forgotten, everything forgotten, except the stupid, beautiful, perfectly fucked up man sitting before him.

He could not believe what he was hearing. Yes, okay, fine, maybe he'd convinced himself he was being a little less obvious with Operation Proposal, and sure, he'd had few false starts but... How could James ever think he wasn't sure? It was pretty much the only thing left to be sure about in his life—he couldn't even count on people aging in the right direction anymore!

"I'm positive," he shouted, surprising them both. It echoed through the room, and James's eyes widened. "I am so fucking positive. I want to marry you, James Buchanan Barnes, so much that it makes me feel insane, actually, which is why I kept going back to the proposal drawing board. It all seemed... overblown. Stark Fucking Expo all over again, you know?"

He shook his head, and tried again, feeling like he wasn’t making any sense. "It reminded me of how I was always overcompensating with Pepper. And that's not us, it's not how I wanted to ask."

James was just staring. Tony wanted to grab him, shake some sense into him, took a deep breath and slammed his palms down against the table in frustration. "I love you, you fucking idiot. I can't believe you'd even think for a second that I wasn’t sure about that, about you, about us. And in case you’re having second thoughts, you should probably know this isn’t up for debate—we're getting married whether you like it or not!"

"Did you seriously just insult me while ordering me to marry you?"

"No!" Tony thought about what he'd said, and grimaced. "Or, yes, a little?"
"Alright. Just checking." James smiled, and Tony felt like the fist of fear that had been gripping his heart released its hold, leaving him light, a little giddy, and a lot overwhelmed. "So let's get married then."

Tony’s entire body was shaking. “Okay, great, we’re getting married! Uh, for the record—this?—also not how I wanted to propose.”

“I don’t know. I kinda liked it.” James shrugged, and he looked so beautifully wrecked that Tony wanted to climb into his lap and say fuck it to everything else going on in their lives. They could run away, live on that island together, let Steve figure out his own shit.

“You were right. Hot air balloons, and fireworks, that ain’t us. This though—the world falling to pieces, and having to put it back together again—that’s us in a nutshell, Antoshka.”

Suddenly, Tony couldn't seem to find a comfortable place for his arms, folded them across his chest, then tried his hands on his hips, before giving up and scrubbing them over his face. He was a jumbled mess of residual adrenaline, and misery, and relief, and joy, and excitement, and dread, and anticipation, and the timer was still ticking down in his head.

"I swear, if I get through this day without having a complete nervous breakdown, it'll be a miracle."

James stood up slowly, then came to a parade rest, his eyes once again focused on the reason Tony had called him up to Operations in the first place.

"I have one request, non-negotiable. We wait til Steve is back to normal," he said, his eyes making it clear he wasn't willing to discuss any other possible outcome to Steve’s current situation. "He has to be my best man."

Tony didn't trust himself to speak, just nodded, watched as James began stripping. There was nothing sexual in the act in the least, despite the telltale bulge in James's pants—this was clinical. It was resignation personified. It was a shedding of self, and Tony hated that he couldn't stop it from happening.

Now, when it was too late for comfort, Tony could finally see what the clothes had hidden. Proof of the violent start to their day was painted across the body of the man he loved. Too many bruises for him to count, all outmatched by an angry looking, blood clotted gash along James's side. He was already healing, but knowing that didn’t help, didn’t make Tony feel better in the least. It just made it harder to watch the transformation taking place before him.

James's boots hit the floor with a thud as he removed them, jeans not far behind. He wasted no time slipping into the uniform, his expression darkening significantly by the time he was securing the various straps, and ensuring the armor plating sat comfortably against his skin. The Stars and Stripes seemed almost garish, a striking contrast to the black leather he was accustomed to seeing James wear into battle.

Tony watched, tense and anxious, as James rolled his shoulders, and swung his arms once, twice, checking the give and take, likely cataloging the various differences between his standard armor and the Captain America version.

He pulled on the gauntlets, the gleaming metal of his left hand disappearing, and Tony wasn't sure why seeing that felt so wrong. It was tempting to stop it, to rip the uniform off of him, and send him back downstairs, but he couldn't. This wasn't about him, or James anymore; it was about something bigger.
Long, dark hair hung down, partially obscuring James's face, chin tucked against his chest as he stared at the helmet in his hands. Tony had the odd impulse to say, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio," but bit back the words. Now was not the time for jokes.

"Are you sure," James asked, interrupting his thoughts, voice thick with emotion. "Captain America is supposed to be a role model, not... not a murderer."

Tony grit his teeth at the word. "Good thing you're not a murderer, then."

James raised his eyes, mouth working as he fought the grief.

"Steve wants it this way," Tony said, and seeing the confusion added, "not the baby—our Steve. We talked about, ah... If anything ever happened?" Tony rubbed his temples. "This is what he wants. You're the one he wants to carry on his legacy."

If James was comforted by this, it didn't show. Instead, his mouth trembled, and he set the helmet back down on the table, traced one of the wings painted on the side.

Blinking back tears, he met Tony's eyes for a fleeting moment, then bent over. Before Tony had time to process what was happening (blurred motion of a hand reaching for James's discarded boots) there was a flash of light reflecting off a blade, and...

"Whoa, hey," Tony took a step forward with a hand extended, as if that could stop anything.

With quick efficiency, James gathered up his hair, twisting it as if to pull it into a ponytail, but instead he flicked the opposite wrist. When he pulled his hand away, the dark strands came along for the ride, until James opened his fist and let them fall to the floor beside him. Hair taken care of, he slammed the knife down into the table. It shook back and forth violently from the impact, the tip likely dulled as a result, but James was done with it, was already reaching for the helmet.

Tony bit down hard into his lower lip, stomach churning uncomfortably as he watched James tilt his head so the longer pieces of his hair would fall back, remain hidden. Only then did he slide on the helmet, and secure the strap beneath his chin. With a last, fluid movement, he lifted the shield from the table, and slid it into place, snug against his back.

Just like that, Tony wasn't looking at James anymore, he was looking at Captain America.

Everything in his heart screamed at the wrongness, even as his brain assessed, and his mouth opened. He couldn't act like James's lover, he had to be Iron Man, had to put the safety of the team and their secret first.

"No more guns."

James straightened, shifted his stance slightly, before folding his hands behind his back, a soldier at the ready.

"I know." James's voice was flat and even, his eyes dry, but blazing with anger.

"No knives, either."

"I know how Captain America fights," he snarled.

Tony bristled. "I hope so. We can't have any slip ups."

James stood his ground, nostrils flaring. The leather creaked ominously, and Tony wondered if
James would regret agreeing to marry him by the time they went downstairs.

"Understood." James tilted his chin defiantly. It reminded Tony quite a bit of the first time he'd looked into the deep blue sky of Captain America's eyes only to find them colder than the ice they'd found him preserved in. "Are we done?"

"No." The timer in his head was ticking away, faster than ever. "Wear it downstairs. We're having an impromptu team meeting."

James looked like he wanted to protest, but instead he simply said, "Yes, sir."

Tony swallowed, and thought of the couch in his workshop, of the bottle stashed beneath. "How's the fit?"

"I won't know for sure until fighting in it," he answered flatly.

"Fair enough."

Tony took a deep breath, and headed for the elevator, trusting James to follow. But James didn’t follow. Captain America did. Tony half expected to see the other man, the man he loved, still standing there in the semi-darkness of the room, lost and alone. What he saw instead was closer to the shedded skin of a snake; pieces of a man scattered across the floor, as if James Buchanan Barnes was extraneous, unwanted, unnecessary.

And he hated it. Hated that he was the one making it happen, that Steve had put him in this position, that responsibility had won out over love. The elevator doors slid shut, and Tony didn't know where to look. He felt ashamed of himself, disgusted, even though he knew he'd made the right call.

Five minutes, forty-two seconds and counting.

"JARVIS, I’m going to need Pepper to come up with some of her PR magic. We need to be ready in case the press gets wind that there’s a baby in the tower. I want a couple scenarios to choose from. Make sure she keeps in mind the big unknown of when, or even if, Steve will revert to adulthood."

"Very well, sir."

"We’re on high alert from here on out, J. When the other shoe drops, we need to be ready to assemble."

"I don’t think I can do this," James whispered.

"No speaking Russian while in the uniform," Tony ordered before actually processing what had been said.

When he looked up from his shoes, he realized James hadn’t been talking to him, though, not really; he’d been talking to his own reflection. His jaw was clenched, and Tony recognized the chaotic way he was breathing, the glassy look in his eyes.

"James."

Four minutes and thirty-seven seconds.

"I was… Zola called me the new face of HYDRA," he murmured. "What was Steve thinking?"

"He was thinking the same thing I was. Courage, honor, loyalty, sacrifice. You're braver than you think, stronger. You'll never stop fighting for what's right, you'll never compromise your integrity."
James was looking at him now, which was better. Tony grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Contrary to popular belief, I know exactly what I’m doing,” he said. “You’re the only other man I’ve ever known worthy of carrying the shield.”

Two minutes and sixteen seconds.

And then, because his day wasn’t confusing enough already, Tony Stark finally got to fulfill his childhood dream of kissing Captain America.

Chapter 8

When the elevator doors slid open, all hell broke loose. Tony ignored the wave of questions, exclamations, and general mayhem. Nothing mattered except Steve squealing with delight and trying to push his way through the sea of adult legs surrounding him.

Tony crouched down to kid level, and Clint finally took the hint and stepped aside so Steve could toddle past, and more or less hurl himself in Tony’s direction. Then little arms were encircling his neck, the high pitched, excited baby babble making him wince just a little, even as he smiled.

Beyond caring what any of them thought at this point, Tony closed his eyes, and let himself focus only on hugging Steve, just for a moment.

One of the downsides to the way his brain worked was his ability to remember. A therapist had once told him that most people's childhoods were a mishmash of feelings tied to hazy recollections, and that one of his problems was that his memories were a little too crisp, and accessible. It wasn't like Tony could project back to kicking it in his mother's womb or anything, but he could dig pretty deep into the archives.

He could all too easily remember the feeling of waiting and waiting for Howard to come home. There were even days when the waiting paid off, his father arriving sober and in a relatively good mood, actually smiling (it was a tired, resigned smile, but it was still a smile) to find Tony there. Maybe he'd even get his hair ruffled, be allowed to tell his dad about his day.

Most of the time the waiting was just that. Waiting. Hours of waiting until he was practically asleep on his feet, and someone took him to bed. That wasn't great, but it was better than waiting only to have Howard brush past him, barking for the nanny or his mother to, "collect the boy."

So much time had been wasted standing in the foyer of that echoey house, clutching something he'd built or found. A prop. Something to give him an excuse, something to show dad, because even back then he'd figured out he wasn't good enough all on his own; he had to add value, because his father was a busy man.

Whenever possible, Jarvis (the man not the AI) checked on him, brought him little treats, sometimes even convinced Tony to come back into the kitchen instead. He'd known Tony was wasting his time, but it wasn't his place to explain that to a three year old.

Steve chattered excitedly, and Tony grinned. "I missed you to," he whispered.

Tony squeezed Steve a bit tighter, held him closer. He couldn't go back in time and give that lonely little boy the only thing he'd ever wanted and never received, but at least he could give it to Steve.

“You got heavier in the last half hour,” he accused once he’d picked him up. Steve was grinning at
him, wide eyed and ecstatic, like they’d been apart thirty years instead of thirty minutes. “What have they been feeding you?”

“Okay, now I’ve seen everything,” Sam said. “Baby Steve was freaky enough before Captain America and Daddy Warbucks showed up.”

“Tony,” and that was Bruce, patient but curious, and the rest of the conversation in the room died down. “Want to fill us in?”

Tearing his eyes away from Steve, Tony glanced at each of them in turn, ending with James. He looked calmer now. Tony would have liked to believe it was because of his little pep-talk, but it likely had more to do with keeping up a brave front for the team, for Steve.

James gave him a nod.

“In case it isn’t obvious, the role of Captain America will now be played by Bucky Barnes.” Steve wanted to make his approval of this known, so Tony let him finish before continuing. “Nicely put. Baby Cap is right. We have to assume the worst, and act accordingly.”

The team shifted, sharing glances, but no one had anything to say, which was either good, or really bad.

“Widow, I want you to oversee training. 0600 hours, people. Barnes shouldn’t have any issue mimicking Steve’s fighting style, but I’m not taking any chances. We all have ingrained responses to each other we’ll need to overcome.”

Natasha nodded her approval. “Hawkeye and Falcon, you’re with me.” She ignored Sam’s quiet, “I guess that means I’m staying here?” and asked, “How long do you need Thor and Hulk for?”

“Hard to say. We’ll know better once Bruce and I fire up the flux capacitor in,” Tony glanced at his watch, frowned when he realized how late it had gotten, “five hours and thirty-one minutes.”

“I stand ready to assist,” Thor announced solemnly.

James took a step forward, so that he was standing shoulder to shoulder with Tony. “As much as possible, it needs to be business as usual,” and it was strange hearing him sound so confident, when just minutes before he’d appeared broken beyond repair. “I’ll be calling the shots once we’re in the field. I need to know now if that’s a problem for anyone.”

Everyone looked at each other, and Tony wasn’t surprised in the least when Clint answered for the group. “No problems here, Captain.” He looked left and right, added, “and that’s speaking for all of us.”

“Good. Wrap it up and get some rest,” James ordered. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us. JARVIS, make sure Sam has everything he needs.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Stark,” and Tony surprised himself a little by straightening up when his name was called, finding he now had Captain America’s full attention. “Eat something.”

Tony’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to protest, but then his baby human shield was being taken from him, and Steve didn’t seem to mind. He was clapping and kicking his feet happily, and Tony struggled not to lose his mind completely over the surreality of Captain America cradling baby Steve Rogers. He wasn’t the only one, apparently.
“No, I take it back, that is the freakiest thing I’ve ever seen.” Sam shook his head.

“Thanks for sticking around, Sam.” James gathered up the bags of baby supplies, and nodded towards the elevator. “We’re heading upstairs.” Tony tried once again to open his mouth, but was cut off with yet another order. “Eat. Something.”

Two sets of blue eyes gave him The Captain America Look, so Tony threw his hands up in surrender, and went to see if there was anything left from dinner that he could inhale before joining them upstairs.

He was halfway through destroying something spicy while leaning over the sink (he really had no idea what it was, he was just going through the motions of eating) when Clint made a very obvious show of approaching him. He could only assume Natasha had passed on the “no sneaking up on Tony” orders, which he appreciated more than… more than…

“Something I appreciate a lot?” he muttered to himself with a half-shrug. He shoved a hunk of bread into his mouth, and chewed thoughtfully. “Not very good, Stark.”

“Was that supposed to make sense?” Clint asked, squinting. Tony shook his head and motioned for Clint to get on with whatever it was he’d come over for. “You and James okay?”

There were a lot of ways to answer that question. He could try to explain how dirty he felt for forcing James (of all people) to assume another persona against his will. Tony could tell Clint how proud he was, how grateful, how lucky he felt that James would let him do it, and still love him afterwards.

He could try to explain how terrified he was. How he selfishly wanted to foist Steve on someone else so he could go upstairs, and try to find the energy to fuck James, to just lose himself in the other man and forget the rest of the world existed. Maybe run away after. Far away.

But Clint was really asking if things between the two of them were okay, was thinking of the tail end of the argument he’d walked in on. And yes, he felt like shit, and James was probably feeling twice as shattered, but they still had each other. That was pretty amazing.

The world falling to pieces, and having to put it back together again—that’s us in a nutshell, Antoshka.

He grinned wildly up at Clint, and shrugged again. “We’re getting married.”

“You finally asked?” Clint’s entire face lit up.

“Er, well, sort of,” Tony grimaced. “More like ordered. But, whatever, verbs aside, it’s all the same.”

Clint shook his head, rubbed the back of his neck, and then pulled Tony into a rough hug. “Congratulations.” Thankfully, before he could get too teary eyed, the hug ended. “Anyone else know?”

Tony shook his head. “Just happened.” Clint was grinning at him, though, and it was stupid how much it meant to Tony to see it. “You’re a real good friend to him,” he said seriously, poking Clint in the chest with a finger. “So I already know you’ll be there for him through this when I can’t be. Right?”

Clint clapped him on the shoulder. “Damn straight.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Which is why I suggest you take your food upstairs to eat it, idiot.”
For reasons beyond his understanding, that option hadn’t occurred to him. “Wow, thanks, yes, I am an idiot.” He grabbed another hunk of bread, another container of… something, and headed for the elevator. Clint gave him a thumbs up before the doors shut.

It was surreal, seeing Captain America’s shield propped up in the entryway of their suite. A little further in, he found boots, and the top half of the uniform was draped over a chair.

The man himself had pulled on a light grey tanktop, still had on his pants, although he was barefoot. Since they were without a crib, James had constructed some strange baby pen by rearranging the furniture, and gathering up copious cushions, pillows, and blankets to serve as bedding.

The lights had been dimmed, but Tony could still make out where Steve was lying facedown in the middle of it all, his mouth hanging open as he snored softly. James was standing nearby, watching him, face blank.

He looked up as Tony approached, and jerked his head in the direction of the bedroom, eyeing the food Tony was still carrying with approval.

It took longer than he’d expected to turn off the lights and walk away from Steve’s vulnerable, sleeping form. Once he was in the bedroom, James closed the door, but not all the way; he left it open a crack, and made a quiet request of JARVIS to let them know if Steve woke up.

"Did he conk out on his own, or did you have to knock him on the head with something?"

"Ha ha." James tried and failed to stifle an epic yawn. "He's exhausted, just like the rest of us."

Tony took another spoonful of food, not wanting to be accused of not following orders, his thoughts immediately wandering. James, rutting against him, the two of them clinging to each other desperately in Operations, the angry wound down his side, the taste of tears.

The jagged nature of his improvised haircut wasn’t necessarily flattering, but it could have been worse. Coupled with his mood, it gave James a strange, feral look, and made Tony want to run his hands through it, try to neaten it up, maybe. Or get it real messy.

He had a big soft spot (or maybe it was a hard spot?) for the long hair, but there was something about the shorter look that did wonderful, wonderful things for the shape of James's jaw, and his eyes, and those cheekbones.

Unfortunately, while the mind was willing, at the moment his flesh was feeling especially weak. He set down his dinner, unable to bring himself to eat any more, and stretched, feeling everywhere his body hurt which was, well, almost everywhere.

James didn’t speak, simply unbuttoned his pants, yanked them off, and tossed them across the room. Tony watched the flexing muscles of his back, of his thighs, and ass, and arms as he crawled across the bed, and flopped down face first, assuming a position much like the one Steve had opted for.

“J, lower the lights,” Tony asked, keeping his voice low. “Gimme about twenty percent or so.”

On the bed, James pushed himself up on his elbows, then managed to roll onto his back with a huff of discomfort. Even with the low lighting, Tony could see where the tank top was sticking to his wound.

“You should let me dress that.”

James snorted, pushing his bangs out of his face. “Not moving.”
Tony couldn’t really argue with that. He chucked his own pants, not bothering with taking off his t-shirt, and frowned at the clock. “Get us up at 5:35,” he requested around a yawn.

“Make that 0500, JARVIS.” His wince of dismay prompted James to add, “Stevie’ll need to be fed, and changed. And dressed.”

Which made sense, but also sucked. Tony crawled into the bed beside James, and for a moment, the two of them just stared up at the ceiling together, Tony enjoying the warmth spreading out from everywhere their bodies touched.

At the moment, even the idea of rolling over sounded like a Herculean feat, especially since Tony was struggling to keep his eyes open, but he wanted to be closer. It shouldn’t have surprised him that James met him halfway, the two of them colliding in a tangle of limbs, until arms were around him, and a head was tucked under his chin.

He only just had the wherewithal to begin appreciating how amazing James felt in his arms, how good it felt to be so close, when the body curled against his own began shaking.

Tony’s stomach churned, the food he’d eaten now feeling like lead, his own eyes tearing up even as James began sobbing. It was quiet, and strangled, and Tony knew he was responsible for some of those tears, even if he’d had no choice.

James clung to him, and Tony pulled him as close as possible, rocked him, ran his hands up and down James’s back, held him tight, cried with him. “I know,” he whispered over and over. Because he did.

They cried together, James’s hands fisted into the fabric of Tony’s t-shirt, all legs and arms and tears, tangled up together in the center of the bed, until they were kissing. Tony tried to kiss every inch of James’s face, his jaw, along his shoulder, then started over again with his mouth.

“It shouldn’t be me,” James whispered, but Tony cut him off with another kiss, stroking his palm up along the nape of James’s neck, which seemed vulnerable and exposed now that his hair was no longer hiding it.

He tried to kiss away the tears, but that was a lost cause. Instead, he just held on tight, stroked his hair and told him, "it's just the two of us here, you don't have to be anyone but yourself."

This seemed to work, he could feel James's breath steadying, the sobs slowing down, so he added, "We only ever have to be James and Antoshka, here."

Tony pulled back enough to be able to look into James’s eyes, which were red, and puffy, his dark lashes clumped together with tears. He was still the most beautiful thing Tony had ever seen. Slowly, he dragged his thumb along the curve of James’s stubbled jaw, traced the shell of his ear, before sliding his fingers into his shorn hair.

“It’s just you and me,” he whispered, kissing him softly.

James sighed, and when he spoke, Tony could feel him shaping the words against his lips. "And Steve."

Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat, and waited until James would look him in the eyes again. “Not here,” he swore, kissing him again, possessively, hungrily. “And not here, not like this,” he added, pressing James’s hand just to the side of the arc reactor, so he could feel the beating of Tony’s heart. “That’s just you and me.”
James took his hand back, took Tony’s with it, placed it over his own heart. “You and me,” he agreed with a nod. He took a deep breath, and exhaled shakily. “I’m so… fucking mad at him, Antoshka. I hate that I’m mad at him.”

“You’re allowed to be,” Tony swore. “Hey, I’m not thrilled, either. In fact, we can tag-team lecture him once this is over, and he’s taller than us again.”

“Don’t you mean if?”

“When. Definitely when. We’ll get him back,” Tony promised, “you’ll see.” He pressed their foreheads together, dug deep, and found a brave little smile somewhere. “He’s got best man duties to fulfil, remember.”

James nodded.

“I’m so, so sorry it has to be this way.” Tony whispered, stroking the side of his face. “I’m so sorry, and at the same time, I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“Shut up,” James hissed, but he pulled Tony closer, pressed his face against the side of Tony’s neck.

“And in love,” he added quietly, petting James. “Very much in love.”

“Damn right you are.”

Everything felt damp with tears, and slightly uncomfortable as a result, but that was fine. That was life. It was a hell of a lot better than the alternative.

Slowly, the body in his arms lost some of its tension, breathing shifting into something slow and steady, so Tony snapped a few times. JARVIS took the hint, turned off the lights, and he was left staring into the darkness, a sleeping James heavy in his arms.

And even though it felt like he’d only just closed his eyes, he must have slept, because suddenly the time on the clock had jumped ahead about twenty minutes. James was propped up on an elbow in the bed, rubbing at his face with his other hand, and groaning in annoyance, while JARVIS unnecessarily informed them that Steve had woken up.

Tony had figured that much out. “The screaming clued me in, J,” he grumbled. Steve was one hell of an effective alarm clock.

“I’m coming,” Tony shouted, but he was still disoriented, and somehow got his feet caught in the blankets, so instead of climbing out of bed, he fell out, face first. With a growl of frustration, he flopped onto his back, and started tugging furiously at the blankets, trying to disentangle himself.

“You okay?” he heard James ask, but didn’t bother to answer.

Finally free, Tony managed to stagger to his feet, shouting, “coming,” again, hoping Steve could hear him over his own racket.

He spun into the other room, managing to catch himself on the doorframe, and two seconds later he knocked over a lamp, despite JARVIS helpfully having raised the lighting levels for him. “Fuck me!”


Tony managed not to kill himself as he ran in, and found Steve standing in the middle of his baby
shanty town, sucking on two of his fingers, bright red in the face, covered with tears and snot, and looking accusingly up at Tony. He’d stopped crying, at least, realizing he was no longer alone.

“Yes, yeah, m’here, hello,” Tony announced, climbing over a chair and down into the makeshift crib James had constructed. “Okay, babyface, c’mere, what’s the matter?”

Bleary eyed and only half awake, Tony used his own t-shirt to wipe Steve’s face clean, then checked his diaper (thankfully empty), asked if he was hungry (and look at that, Steve had learned to shout the word no!), and then collapsed against the cushions in defeat.

“I give up, squirt,” he murmured, and managed to get his legs partially covered by blanket. “Wake me up when you figure it out.”

Almost immediately, Steve flopped back down beside him, draped himself half on top of Tony, one tiny fist balled up against the faint glow of the arc reactor.

“Mm, right, alone in the dark,” Tony mumbled, “I didn’t like that either.” He curled an arm around Steve. “Used to have nightmares, could never find anyone,” he slurred sleepily. “Nightmares about being the only person left on the planet.”

His eyes were already closed, but he managed to crack them back open a moment later when he heard James shuffle into the room.

“Shut up in here,” he grumbled, but he was already climbing over the couch to join them.

“Bu bu.”

With a grunt of discomfort, James shifted around until the three of them were able to share the limited space, Steve nestled safely between them. Because he was the best, JARVIS lowered the lights a bit more without being asked, leaving enough to supplement the glow of the reactor, in case Steve started freaking out again.

Fumbling, Tony reached for and found James’s hand, held on, and let his eyes close again.

Chapter 9

Tony jerked awake when something heavy landed on top of him and started bouncing, which was incredibly unfortunate, because he really had to pee.

“Whadafuckishappening?” he whined, shoving the weight aside, trying to reorient himself. Also, his eyes definitely didn’t want to open, and his head hurt, and so did his face for that matter, and he was pretty sure he was under attack.

“Help?”

Struggling against gravity, Tony managed to prop himself up on an elbow, and half crack one eye open. Steve was grinning at him, had his face shoved close enough that Tony had to lean back a bit before he could focus enough to even figure out that the blurry shape was their new roommate.

“Onn!” Steve shrieked happily, lunging at him again.

Tony flopped back down with a moan of despair. “James?” he called, desperately. He wasn’t sure if he received a reply or not, because he couldn’t hear over Steve’s excited chatter. “Yes, okay, we’re
awake and excited, yay!"

It took a minute to fight his way upright in the makeshift baby bed, and even then he only managed to stand, swaying on his feet while Steve hugged his legs. Tony ruffled Steve’s hair, struggled with a jaw cracking yawn, the engine of his mind refusing to crank.

James stalked into the room half dressed, clean shaven, smelling good, and holding coffee. His hair was damp and combed back, some of the irregular longer, ragged strands clinging to his neck, and Tony wanted to just throw him to the floor and…

“What happened to your face?”

Blinking himself back from fantasyland, Tony accepted the mug of coffee he was being offered, and grinned stupidly as James took him by the chin and tilted his face up to the light. He prodded Tony’s cheek with two fingers, which, “Ow! What the... Oh, right, fell out of bed, remember?”

James shook his head, but he was smiling in a way that made Tony's chest do funny things. "C'mon, get moving."

"Make me," Tony answered around his mug, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"No time. We let you sleep in, so you only have twenty minutes to deal with that bed head. I'll finish getting Stevie ready."

Tony pouted, but there was no point arguing. He'd given the order for the early start, couldn't really skip out on what was certain to be another horribly long day, no matter how exhausted he was.

James tugged a chair out of the way so Tony didn't have to try climbing while drinking coffee, and took Steve's hand. It was strange watching them walk off together holding hands, James leaning to one side and moving slowly so Steve could keep up. James glanced over his shoulder and smiled, and Tony had the oddest impulse to run after them. It didn't really make sense, they were only going into the bedroom so James could finish dressing, but it felt a little like he'd never see them again.

Tony choked down the rest of his coffee despite it burning his mouth, and rushed through his morning routine, struggling with the weird paranoia that was settling into his chest. He'd probably seen too many cheesy movies, or maybe it was only that life rather consistently pulled the rug out from under him, but having good news and something to look forward to in the middle of a crisis felt like having a target painted on his back.

In a cheesy newsreel announcer voice, he said, "What's this? Tony Stark is attempting happiness? Arm the missiles, boys!"

"Sir?"

Tony jerked just before dragging the razor across his cheek. "Daddy's a little high strung right now, J, so maybe keep that in mind when I'm holding sharp things? Or anything volatile for that matter."

"My apologies."

"No, I'm sorry." Tony summoned some cheer, and tried again. “Good morning! Everything okay?"

"I wished to inform you that Ms. Potts-Hogan has done her best to clear your schedule for the foreseeable future, although she does indicate you will be needed in Japan next month.”

Tony grimaced. “Steve better be wiping his own ass by then.”
“Quite. Additionally, Thor has prepared breakfast. A plate will be waiting for you in the lab.”

Tony's stomach grumbled in anticipation. "Great, tell him thanks. Oh, maybe let James know so he
doesn't waste time making anything?"

"Already done. Oh, and sir? Allow me to extend my congratulations on your forthcoming nuptials."

Tony's heart did a little flip flop of combined happiness and terror. "Thanks, JARVIS. Uh, which
reminds me, can you keep an extra close eye on him until this all blows over? I want him in
quarantine if he so much as sneezes.” Tony took another quick pass with his razor. “Maybe I should
build him a suit."

"A suit might negate the purpose of him assuming the Captain’s identity."

“Party pooper.”

“I shall do my utmost to keep him safe, sir. But, might I suggest you share your fears for his safety,
lest he misinterprets your behavior as having second thoughts?"

Tony ducked his head and grinned. "Wow, my paranoia is that obvious?"

"You spent a good portion of your shower conversing with yourself over bad luck, retiring police
officers being shot on their last day of duty, and something involving armed missiles aimed at your
happiness."

Tony laughed. "Right, thanks for looking out for me."

"My pleasure."

Tony wiped his face clean of any residual shaving cream, then headed into the bedroom to dress as
quickly as possible. On the far side of the room, he spotted the clothes James had been wearing the
day before this had all started, tossed there as they'd made their way to the bed, attention focused
entirely on each other. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Ditching the t-shirt he was holding, Tony snatched up James's discarded shirt, and pulled that on
instead. The fabric was soft against his skin, and smelled of James, and that was much, much better.

Tony found them waiting in the kitchen when he finished up. James was in full Captain America
mode from the neck down. Baby Cap was swinging his legs enthusiastically, perched on the edge of
a chair munching away while James held on to make sure he didn't topple off.

"Whoa, what's going on in here, are you eating my breakfast?"

Steve made a happy sort of sound and tipped his head back to grin up at Tony, mouth full of half
chewed something or other. It was stupid how cute the kid was. Unable to help himself, Tony leaned
over and gave him a kiss on the forehead (and yes, he did enjoy that this made Steve squeal happily,
thank you very much) before stalking over to the coffee machine.

When he looked up from his mug, he found James staring at him, and Tony had just enough time to
start feeling guilty for indulging in the domesticity of the moment, when he realized why James was
staring.

It was the shirt.

Keeping one hand on Steve’s shoulder so he couldn’t go anywhere, James rose to his feet and stood
behind Steve’s chair, nodding for Tony to join him.

Mm, and that was nice, getting pulled in close, having James nuzzle his jaw, and bring his mouth up against his ear. "Did you jerk off while you were in there?” he asked, voice soft, and raspy, his breath coming in a hot puff against Tony’s skin, and that was just so unbelievably unfair.

Tony snorted into his coffee, glad the question had been asked in Russian. Thor might claim Steve had a normal baby's brain, but Tony was convinced he still had pretty decent comprehension. At least, he seemed to be grasping everything Tony had been laying on him so far.

"Uh, no," he managed eventually.

“Good, me neither.”

James’s hand slid down to squeeze his ass while he made a rumbling sound of appreciation, dragging his teeth up along the column of Tony’s throat, eventually working his way over to his mouth.

This was also completely unfair, because it was so definitely not a “good morning” kiss, or an “enjoy your day of science and babysitting” kiss, it was down and dirty with tongue and teeth. It was an “I’m going to make you come so hard you scream” kiss.

When he was done, Tony was left standing there dazed, with a completely inappropriate (considering their company) erection and a cup of coffee he was desperately trying not to spill on himself. James eyed him up and down with a satisfied smirk, and Tony burst out laughing, not sure what else to do with his surplus of emotions.

“Sirs, you have five minutes and counting.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.” James’s smile faltered, and Tony’s chest ached to see it. When he spoke again, there was no sign of the previous playfulness; it was all sad resignation. “Time to go be Captain America.”

Tony set his mug of coffee down, grabbed hold of James, and hugged him tight, reluctant to let him go. "I love you," he whispered.

James gave him another kiss, this time against the bruise on his cheek, said, "love you, too. Try to stay in one piece until I see you again, okay?"

Tony snapped off a salute. "Yessir. You, too."

“Alright. Time to get a move on.” James sighed while disentangling himself, and to Tony’s surprise, he leaned over and actually gave Steve a kiss goodbye. “Keep him out of trouble for me, will ya?”

Steve agreed to do his best, and the two of them watched as James exited the kitchen. Again, there was the strange feeling of being left behind, the worry that something horrible was going to happen to James as soon as he was out of sight.

None of us know how much time we have left.

Which was true, but also something he desperately tried not to dwell on, mostly so he didn’t spend his waking hours curled in the fetal position under his desk. It would have been good to keep in mind when planning his proposal, though. Tony was kicking himself, because they could have already been married if he hadn’t wasted so much time psyching himself out.

Now that it’d happened, and James had said yes, and it was out there—a real, legitimate thing that
was happening, and not a hope, or a dream—Tony wanted to skip ahead. Part of him was tempted to see if James would agree to elope. They could sort the legally binding half of things, then have the ceremony after, once Steve was out of diapers again.

It wasn’t particularly romantic, though, and James deserved some romance, especially after the way the proposal had gone down. Besides, Tony wanted to dance at their wedding, and have their friends there on the big day. Once upon a time, he’d have called it cheesy, but now Tony found he wanted photos, video, rings, and to spend way too much money on food and fancy clothes. The whole 9 yards. He was only getting married once, so he should at least do it right. As long as James was also interested in that sort of wedding, of course.

Which meant they had to wait, their lives effectively on hold while Steve had his spirit quest. And, according to Thor, it sounded like Steve's success hinged upon Tony and James, and their ability to parent their best friend, so he was probably screwed.

Love. It all came back to love, somehow.

He loved James. What they had was at the top of Tony’s priority list; the rest could fall to shit, but if he still had James, he’d find a way to bounce back. Sacrificing their little world of two to take on the responsibility of raising Steve (especially if they were going to continue being heroes) was nightmarish to consider, but if that morning had shown him anything, it was that they’d figure it out, find a way to make it work.

What had him more concerned was his inability to shake Bruce’s line of inquiry from the day before. Technically, his reasoning was still valid—telling James that he’d spent the better part of his life harboring one hell of a crush on Captain America wasn’t exactly a great way to start out a relationship, but it wasn’t like they were "starting out" anymore. They were going to get married. James had a confidence, a self assuredness that had been absent back in the beginning.

All of that left him feeling sick with guilt, like he was sitting on a ticking time bomb of a secret. Especially if Steve’s current predicament was his fault. Especially if James was going to continue on as Captain America.

“So, I don’t really have a choice, right?”

“Hm?” Bruce looked up from his display, eyes unfocused. “Wait, were you talking to me?” Tony threw his hands up in the air, and looked around the lab. “Sorry, I checked out somewhere around, ah, poddy training, maybe?”

“Bruce, I have been, and always shall be your friend, but listening? Not your strong suit.”

Steve decided to chime in and point out that this criticism wasn’t really fair since Tony had been talking for about two hours straight, and the conversation had originally been with Steve, not Bruce. It was only natural that he’d turned it into background noise and focused on the task at hand, rather than wasting valuable science time on Tony’s rambling.

“Okay, fine, fair, but I’d still like his opinion.”

Bruce pushed away from his desk so that he and his wheeled chair quickly crossed the distance between them, until Tony found himself face to face and knees to knees with a concerned friend.

“Did you get any sleep last night?”

Tony squirmed. “Not much.”

“And before all this, you’d been burning the midnight oil working on the War Machine upgrades?”
More squirming. “Maybe.”

Bruce nodded, his serious expression momentarily faltering as Steve reached forward from his position on Tony’s lap and tried to pull his glasses off of his face. Tony intercepted the tiny hand, and sighed.

“I hope you won’t take it the wrong way if I tell you that you look like shit,” Bruce quirked a smile his way. “We’ve been at this most of the day. I’m sure Steve could use a break. Maybe even a nap?”

“In other words, I’m annoying, and distracting, and not actually helping any.” Bruce pushed his lips into a thin line, and raised his eyebrows. “Right, sorry, that isn’t what you said, I’m doing that thing you hate.”

“Because you’re exhausted.”

Tony chewed on his lower lip and studied Bruce’s face. “I have to tell him, don’t I?”

Bruce sighed, but at least he was smiling encouragingly. “If you have to ask, then the answer is probably yes.”

“Good rule of thumb.” Tony rubbed absently at the bridge of his nose. “Fuck. And yes, before you say it, I know he isn’t going to dump me because of this, it’s just… I hate hurting him.” He exhaled shakily. “I hate seeing that haunted look back in his eyes. He’s being so brave, Bruce, and he’s trying to be strong for me, and I just keep throwing more and more at him. It’s only a matter of time before he breaks.”

Bruce leaned forward, and rubbed his hands up and down Tony’s arms, almost as if trying to warm him. “Go take a nap, then talk with James. You’ll be glad you did in the end. I’ll let you know if I come up with anything here.”

Only, Tony skipped the part about taking a nap. His intentions were good, but after changing and feeding Steve, he found a top of the line crib in his suite, just waiting to be assembled. Of course, once he’d started doing that, he quickly decided it wasn’t up to snuff, and so he and Steve headed off to the workshop.

Once there, he managed an hour or so of work on the new project before Natasha distracted him, and he forgot all about fabricating a proper baby enclosure for their little soldier.

“How’d he do?”

Natasha didn’t answer him at first, attention focused on Steve. "Why is he wearing that?" she asked, pointing to the dunce cap.

"That was all his idea, don't look at me."

As if to prove Tony's point, Steve made a delighted noise and clapped his hands. Natasha shook her head, and finally answered Tony's question.

"Raw." She studied the schematics Tony was playing with. "Steve doesn't have quite the same enthusiasm. Unless you knew to look, you'd chalk it up to Captain America having a bad day."

"Not good enough." Tony rubbed his temples, and crossed his arms over his chest. "J, footage if you don't mind."

"Not at all, sir."
Natasha leaned back against the edge of the worktable, and Tony resisted the urge to fidget as she watched him watching James. "Congrats, by the way."

Tony frowned as Captain America swung the shield, effectively blocking a vicious swing of Thor's hammer, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl. "Could say the same for you," he answered absently.

Natasha cracked her knuckles, and Tony shifted uncomfortably. "Hm?"

"Steve will cry if you murder me in front of him," Tony reminded her. "Shit. He's leading with the left way too much."

"We worked on that. It's a bit better now." Natasha eyed him critically. "Practice makes perfect. You're scheduled for a session at 17:00."

Tony pulled his eyes away from the video footage. "Today?" Natasha nodded. "Nat, that's ten minutes from now. Can't it wait?"

"Nope. I'll watch Steve, just explain to him that it's Avengers business like last time."

Tony scrubbed his hands over his face, and looked around at the mess that was his workshop, feeling torn in multiple directions. With a sigh, he leaned over the makeshift fence he'd hastily assembled, and pulled Steve into a hug, the dunce cap falling off in the process.

"You heard mean Auntie Natasha," Tony said. "I'll try not to be long. If you need me, JARVIS will call, okay?"

Tony had no idea if Steve understood or not, he'd just have to hope the kid didn't start screaming bloody murder as soon as he stepped away.

"Okay, he'll be hungry again in about an hour. He's maxed out on chicken, try to switch it up. Um, oh, diapers are there, and..."

"Go." Tony stopped babbling, and stared at Natasha. Despite the seriousness in her tone, the corner of her mouth was turned up in a smile. "You're under orders to spend at least one hour going at it with Barnes."

"Yes, okay, going. Be good," he added, kissing the top of Steve's head. "See you soon."

It wasn't until he was in the suit and standing opposite James that Natasha's wording clicked for Tony.

"Get out of the suit." James ordered.

No one else was around, there wasn't a simulation loaded, and James looked as if he'd already spent the day fighting the entire world. Tony could see the exhaustion plainly, but James was also flushed pink, his hair sticking to his head a bit with sweat, and oh, he was yanking off his gauntlets, and yes, right, "going at it" now made more sense.

By the time he'd gotten out of the armor, James was already there, reaching for him.

"C'mere," and James had a hold of him, pulled them together, was kissing down into Tony's mouth with great enthusiasm. "Been thinking about this all day," he sighed, sucking Tony’s lower lip into his mouth.

"Mm," was all Tony could come up with for a moment. "Hey, uh, actually, I needed to talk to you."
"Did you find something out?" He sounded so hopeful.

Tony groaned. James had his hands on his ass, squeezing, and it felt like he was about to pull a repeat of what had gone down in Operations. "Um, not really. This is..." James licked his lips, and Tony had to look away before his libido convinced him to chicken out.

Sensing the mood shift, James let go of his ass, hands coming up to frame Tony's face instead, thumbs stroking along his cheeks. "What's wrong?"

Tony chewed the inside of his lip and shrugged. "Okay, first, I'm terrified something's going to happen to prevent us from getting married."

"Me too."

Tony's eyes widened as he looked up, finding James once again looked serious, concerned, maybe even a little terrified. "Not, like, one of us changing our minds, but..."

"Me too, Antoshka," he repeated, and his emphasis made it clear he didn't particularly want to discuss all the horrible things that could potentially take place to prevent them from marrying each other.

"Right. Ah, and, second, this thing I want to talk to you about, um. It's more... It wasn't relevant at all, but now with what's happening with Steve, maybe it is, even though, I promise you, it isn't."

James let go of him and took a step back, face scrunched up in confused concern. "I'm gonna need that again, maybe in English this time."

Tony swallowed. "I love you, and when we get married, I want to do it in style, with all of our friends there," James nodded, a hesitant smile on his face, "and not having any secrets. Even ones that aren't really secrets so much as they are irrelevancies from the past."

James blinked. "I still don't..."

"I used to have a thing for Steve. Or, Captain America, I guess." Tony blurted, squeezing his eyes shut. "And, so... before we got married, I thought that you should know. Even though it's ancient history, like I said."

When he opened his eyes again, James was just staring at him, mouth hanging slightly open. "You..." he blinked, and it was strange how young he looked, so incredibly young and vulnerable. "When?" and it came out soft, as if he didn't have the strength to do more than exhale his question.

"Before. I mean, way before, I hadn't even met you yet, and, ah, it wasn't reciprocated. Nothing ever happened, just... It was a little weird for me when we first met, but then Steve and I actually became friends, and I moved on, then we found you, and we—well, you know that part, you were there."

James's mouth trembled noticeably as he processed this information, even as he took a step back, eyes focused on the floor. After a moment or two, he looked up, pinned Tony with his gaze. "How long?"

Tony came up with a dozen or so ways to deflect this question, but shoved the impulse aside. "Since puberty. Or... maybe longer."

James smiled at this, and it was eerie, because it was almost the spitting image of one of Tony's own smiles, one of his wrecked, resigned, self doubting smiles.
"Oh," he answered, all the strength absent from his voice, "so just for most of your life then. I can see how it’d slip your mind."

"It... Look, I don't know how to explain. You have to understand, growing up, Captain America was dead to the rest of the world, but not to Howard, not by a long shot. He was alive, and right there, wedged between me and my dad, and... Shit, half the time I hated him, the other half I wanted to..."

He quickly pumped the brakes on his rambling, but James had already begun filling in the blanks. For just a moment, there was what could only be described as barely suppressed rage flickering in his eyes. "He’s a good looking fella."

Tony felt queasy. He also wished he'd actually taken Bruce’s advice on napping. He wasn't doing a good job of this at all.

"So’s Ryan Gosling," he pointed out. “Only difference between me and a bunch of other fanboys and girls is that I wound up getting to know my celebrity crush.”

James was nodding, but his jaw was tight, and his eyes were bright with unshed tears when he looked up. "Do you still love him?" his voice cracked on the question, his head turning to the side as if he was expecting his hair to fall forward, hide his face. When it failed to do so, he winced.

Seeing it made Tony feel as if someone had sucker punched him. He stepped forward, grabbed James by the shoulders and shook him. “Hey, it wasn’t like that, it wasn’t anything like what I feel for you, not even close.” James looked up, but there was doubt in his sad eyes. “It was hero worship, and… and daddy issues, and a long grocery list of neuroses, and at the time it felt like love. But I didn’t know any better, because I hadn’t met you yet.”

James shook his head. "Do you?"

"Of course I love Steve," Tony snapped. He hated having to defend himself over something as intangible as feelings. "So do you. But I'm not in love with him."

With a shaky sigh, James ran his hands over his face, and started walking away.

"Uh, hey… wait?"

James spun on his heels and held his arms out wide. "What?" he snapped, his eyes blazing. “What did you expect? That I’d just shrug this off?"

Tony blinked, opened and closed his mouth a few times. "Hadn't really thought that far, to be honest."

To his surprise, James laughed at this, which shook some of the tears from his eyes. He wiped at them and shrugged. "I'm tired," he announced, his voice thick with emotion. "Yesterday felt like a year, and then today… I managed to scrape together some time for us, and now this?" He cleared his throat, and looked at Tony beseeching. "I just..."

Tony wasn't sure what he'd expected, but with five long strides, James was on him, had him wrapped up in his arms, suspended between the Earth and James, his toes only just skimming the ground.

"All I wanted was a moment," James finished, setting him back down, and pressing his face into the curve of Tony's shoulder. “To pretend everything is okay.” He shook in Tony’s arms, and all he could think about was the night before, holding James as he wept.
"I'm sorry," Tony carded his fingers through James's hair. "I know, that's all I've been saying lately, but..."

Warm lips moving against his, even as James shook, even as his control slipped. Tony could only groan, hold on, try to breathe around the pain in his chest. James waited until he was pliant, and distracted, and then asked his question. "Why are you telling me now?"

"In case..." and then he stopped, blinking, realizing what he was about to say.

James's eyes were dark, staring right down into Tony's with a questioning intensity Tony hadn't had directed his way in quite some time. "You've decided this is your fault." He opened his mouth to protest, but James was already closing his eyes and stepping away. "Loki said this was about Steve. About something he needs to do for himself."

"Yes, but magic is bullshit, and Loki lies. It's kind of his thing."

"If your feelings for him are ancient history, why would you..." James trailed off, licked his lips, and did a fair job of biting back a laugh that sounded more like a sob. "Unless it isn't? Do you still think about fucking him?"

Just watching the way he struggled to get the question out had Tony's heart feeling like it was about to punch out of his chest, the panic hitting with the force of a tidal wave. He wasn't sure why it hadn't occurred to him that James might go there, but now the words just hung in the room, sucking up all the oxygen.

"No!" he couldn't say it fast enough. "No, no, no. You, I think about you, James, you're all I think about, I promise, just... You have to... please, tell me you believe me?"

His face was shuttered though, mouth quirked to the side. "Tony, right from the beginning, I asked you, I fucking asked, and..."

Tony rushed forward and grabbed his hands. "The morning after our first kiss I woke up and decided then and there to stop drinking. From a kiss. Something that Pepper and Rhodey had been begging me to do for years! JARVIS can corroborate. That's how serious I was about us. Don't you dare accuse me of lying, because I didn't. There was never anything between me and Steve for you to ruin."

Sad blue eyes watched him and Tony felt his spirits sinking further.

"I was... I was so terrified you wouldn't give me a chance. I can't imagine what I would have done if you hadn't."

James stared at their hands. "I'm tired," he said again, sounding broken. When he looked up, Tony could see it; James was only just hanging on. His voice was tight with anger when he continued.

"Do you feel better at least? Because I don't. Not even a little. I wish you hadn't told me. Not today, not now. While I'm..." he swallowed again, pushed the words out, the muscle in his jaw jumping with restraint, “standing here, wearing this.”

Suddenly, Tony felt the weight of all of the ways in which he could have handled things better slam into him like a semi truck. There James stood, hair ragged, his red rimmed, weary eyes full of anger and sorrow and confusion and hurt. So much hurt.

James stood there in a modified version of the uniform his best friend was meant to be wearing, trying to fill those shoes despite the pain it brought him. Tony knew full well that James was scared. He didn’t think he measured up. Felt unworthy of wearing the stars and stripes. Thought he’d
somehow taint the image of Captain America, but he was doing it anyway, for his friend, and for the Avengers, and because Tony had ordered him to.

Tony knew a thing or two about competing against Captain America for attention and affection, and wondered how he would feel if their roles were reversed. If James had told him about a lifetime of misplaced feelings for Captain America, would Tony ever really believe that someone would chose him—with all his problems, and personality defects, and neuroses—over the living legend?

"Shit."

James pulled his hands free of Tony’s, and began walking off again, pausing to scoop up his helmet and gauntlets along the way. After a moment lost to processing what was happening, Tony followed as he marched to the elevators.

“Hey, look, this, I did this all wrong. Please, can we just, I don’t know, sit down, and…”

“No.” And that? That was the Captain America voice.

“Oh.” Tony folded his arms across his chest, tucking his hands under his arms, trying to minimize the shaking. “Okay.” Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, let James see how scared he was, and said, “Hey, ah, just in case something horrible happens, please, please believe me when I say I love you. So fucking much, James.”

James met his eyes for a moment. “I love you, too.”

And then the elevator doors closed.

Chapter 10

Tony and Bucky talk about Tony’s childhood / feelings about Captain America while growing up. A tiny potential trigger warning, Tony touches lightly on something Bucky suspected back in Tactical Advantage:

He had the sinking suspicion that once upon a time, someone hadn’t shown the same level of courtesy to Tony. Had to swallow past the anger, the sorrow, that bubbled up at the thought.

BUT! I promise, they’re so okay, and it’ll feel better by the end of this chapter.

+ 

Iron Man had once flown through a wormhole in space without hesitation despite knowing he had no way home, and no chance to say goodbye to the people he loved. He had been terrified, and awestruck by what he had seen on the other side, had felt the strangest mix of profoundly alone and privileged, but he didn’t regret his choice. A life should count for something, after all, and his… Well, now, maybe it would.

Iron Man had tumbled back to Earth, and things had happened after that, but Tony Stark only actually remembers bits and pieces. The rest he put together from various video sources, conversations, news reports, and JARVIS.

This is what he actually remembers from that day: opening his eyes to find Captain America staring down at him like suddenly he mattered; eating with the team; Pepper, wrapping him up in her arms
and weeping, and the look in her eyes that seemed to say, "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

Shock, that was the problem, that was why he'd felt like he was wrapped in cotton, and only just managing to find his way through the rest of that long, long day. It'd caught up with him eventually, and he'd started processing, and then, much later, the anxiety attacks had begun, and...

Tony Stark stood in the dark, empty suite he shared with James, staring at the partially assembled crib he'd abandoned hours and hours ago, Steve heavy and sleeping in his arms, but he couldn’t remember how he'd gotten there.

First things first. He sat down, shifting his grip on Steve in an attempt not to wake him. Second, he closed his eyes, and took a steadying breath.

"J? What time is it?"

When he answered, JARVIS spoke softly so as not to disturb Steve. "Half past two in the morning."

"Huh." Deep breath in. Deep breathe out. "Um, any idea where James is?"

"He has requested I not provide his specific location, but indicated I should feel free, if asked, to inform you he is in the company of Agent Barton."

"Okay." Tony let his head fall forward, as he fought off the wave of misery washing over him.

"Shall I call him back to the Tower?"

Tempting. Tony worried at his lower lip, considering. "Have they headed into a warzone in order to blow off steam?"

"They have not left the East Coast."

Tony nodded, took another deep breath. "Then he should come back when he's ready. I..." he swallowed, and tried again, keeping his voice low. "I hurt him. It isn't his job to make me feel better about that."

He sat, staring into the dark, feeling exhausted, and paralyzed, and terrified by the prospect of walking into their empty bedroom and closing his eyes.

"Maybe... let him know I asked after him and... and that I love him? But, only, ah, only if he wants the update. Or not, shit... Just, nevermind, don't bother him, JARVIS."

Tony rubbed his palms into his eyes, trying to push away the need to sleep. Push everything away. Unfortunately, he still had to make sure he hadn’t managed to do anything catastrophically stupid during the bits of his day he couldn’t remember.

"Um, so, I'm drawing a few blanks, J, wanna help me fill them in?"

"By all means."

Steve shifted against Tony's chest, a small, contented noise escaping in the process. Tony stared down at the tiny profile of his sleeping face, and found himself wondering if his father had ever watched him sleep when he was a baby. It seemed like a thing fathers would do, a natural inclination, that sort of animal instinct to protect one's offspring kicking in.

"Sir?"
Tony stirred, wondered how long his thoughts had wandered that time. "Sorry, got distracted."

"Might I recommend putting Baby Rogers to bed?" And while JARVIS didn’t say as much, Tony could feel the unspoken suggestion that he also get some much needed shut eye.

"Did I finish his crib?" It came out sharper than he’d intended, mostly because he was annoyed that he couldn’t remember the answer to the question.

"Not as such. As I’m sure you recall, after returning to the workshop, you abandoned the project and opted to spend your time finishing the War Machine upgrades."

Tony straightened. "You'll need to go over all of that with a fine toothed comb before handing anything off to Rhody."

JARVIS was talking to him like he was two seconds away from jumping off the Tower sans armor. "Of course, sir, as you've already requested."

Tony hopped to his feet, suddenly restless. Steve whined in protest, but Tony ignored him. His arms and back and everything ached, and all he wanted to do was let go, but he held on anyway as he paced around the half assembled store bought crib.

"Okay, sorry, ah, so, wanna clue me in on what I did after James left?"

"Sir has requested I inform him if you or Baby Rogers..."

"No, do not call him back, JARVIS!" Tony shouted, forgetting himself.

And that was enough to wake Steve. He immediately began crying, and it would have been fine, except he whined, "Bu bu," as if he knew James was missing and Tony was convinced he would have been okay otherwise, but...

One minute he was standing in his suite, and the next he was banging on Bruce's door, an upset toddler whimpering in his arms. Somewhere amidst the banging he realized what was happening, and stopped.

Tony planned to skulk off, but he only had time to shift his grip on Steve before the door flew open, and he was suddenly face to face with a grumpy looking, scantily dressed Natasha. She didn’t seem particularly surprised to see him, and almost immediately, Tony suspected JARVIS had provided a heads up, which would mean Bruce had sent Natasha to the door, which meant she was likely about to chase him off, which in turn meant he had nowhere to go, really, did he, just back upstairs, back to the dark, empty rooms.

Natasha must have understood he was about to run away, and so she moved quickly, plucked Steve from his arms and walked back inside, leaving Tony no choice but to follow. So he did. He walked after her as if walking to his execution, coming to a halt just inside, leaning against the closed door for support.

When Bruce came to retrieve him, face quirked up in confusion (he must have expected Tony to follow Natasha all the way inside) all Tony could manage was a soft, “Sorry,” before he was wrapped up in a hug.

“Have you slept at all?” Bruce asked softly against his ear.

Tony sniffled, let Bruce take some of his weight, and shrugged. “Dunno. Can’t remember most of tonight, so maybe I was sleep-working.”
"Not great, Tony."

Since he’d already interrupted their evening, it seemed stupid to try to fight it, and so Tony allowed Bruce to lead him inside. With a sigh, he flopped down on the couch, then folded forward, elbows braced on his knees, head in his hands, staring at the floor.

“You told him, then?”

“Yup.”

The couch shifted as Bruce sat down beside him, and then there was a warm hand rubbing circles on his back, and Tony sighed again.

“You know, just for once, you should try taking my advice.”

Anyone else, and it would have sounded judgemental, or harsh, but it was Bruce so despite everything, or perhaps because of everything, Tony burst out laughing, hard enough that he had to sit up so he could actually get air back into his lungs.

“I ask you for it often enough,” Tony groaned, swiping at his eyes, “then I go off and do things the stupid way.”

From one of the other rooms, Tony could hear Natasha singing softly to Steve. He was still fussing despite this, soft, plaintive cries of “Onn,” audible beneath her pretty voice.

Tony turned to find Bruce watching him, the concern deep and evident. He knew Bruce would stay up all night listening if that was what Tony needed, but he was tired of talking. It felt like every conversation only lead to yet another conversation, each worse than the one that had come before.

“Can we sleep here?”

Bruce nodded his head in the direction of the singing, and got up. “Sure. Come on.”

Natasha looked up as they entered, but she didn’t stop singing or stroking Steve’s hair. He knew it was the sleep deprivation, but the entire scene felt incredibly surreal. Natasha’s red hair seemed to flicker brightly, as if made from fire, her eyes reminding him of Loki’s, and for a moment Tony was convinced he was already asleep. Maybe this entire experience—right from the moment he’d found Steve looking up at him through the eyes of a child—was a dream.

When Bruce touched him, he jumped, startled, and then was immediately distracted by the way Natasha’s expression had softened. “Get in the bed,” she ordered, and so Tony climbed in beside her and Steve, kicking off his shoes at the last minute.

He’d only realized once he was in the bed that they were in Bruce’s bedroom, not a spare room, and normally that would be fine, but things had changed. He was kind of worried Natasha was going to murder him for invading her privacy to such a colossal extent. Of course, a pillow over the face wouldn’t be the worst way to end the day he was having.

“I was thinking the couch, maybe,” he protested.

Natasha made herself more comfortable, then smiled sweetly at him over Steve's head. "Shut up."

"Stay," Bruce added, climbing in beside Tony. He flicked the lights off, and then the room was dark, save the glow of the arc reactor in his chest, only lessened slightly by the thin fabric of his t-shirt.
"I was wearing James's shirt before." He had no idea when he'd changed, or where the shirt had wound up, and it made him unspeakably sad.

A small, strong hand brushed his hair back from his forehead. "Hush," Natasha ordered, and then she began singing again.

Tony struggled against his own breathing for a moment, but slowly, the tension eased. Bruce was a warm presence beside him, a hand curled around Tony's wrist to keep him from going anywhere.

As soon as he'd climbed into the bed, Steve had tucked himself up under Tony's chin, and now he was breathing softly, already asleep. Tony knew Natasha was singing for him as she stroked his hair, and Tony made a mental note to buy her something ridiculously nice in the morning.

And then he fell asleep.

+Fingers in his hair, gentle, soothing. Tony opened his eyes and frowned, momentarily confused by the lacy underwear hanging off of a lamp across the room until he remembered he'd sought refuge with Bruce and Natasha.

"How long was I asleep?" he asked, letting his eyes fall closed again. He was definitely buying Natasha her own island, couldn't believe she was still comforting him in the light of day.

"Not sure. Just got in."

Tony's eyes flew back open, even as he turned in the bed to find James there, staring at the same lamp, his expression dark.

"Hi." Tony watched the bobbing of James's Adam's apple, not trusting himself to say anything else.

He'd had his hair fixed, the ragged strands now cut neatly, the style reminiscent of something from the good old days. High and tight, with just the right amount of fade, it suited him, but that wasn't very surprising, all things considered.

With a sigh, James faced him, dark circles under his sad eyes, but, hey, it appeared the anger was gone. He stared down at Tony as if he was dreaming with his eyes open, not meeting his eyes as he dragged his knuckles down along Tony's cheek, then again along his jawline. It was tender yet somehow disconnected.

The moment stretched out, Tony's heart hammering away hard enough he was sure James could hear it, until Natasha yelled, "Mess up my sheets, and I end you." A slamming door made it clear they were alone.

Tony pressed his lips together to keep himself from laughing.

"So how long's that been a thing?" James asked, arching an eyebrow.

"No idea. Just found out yesterday. Or the day before? I don't know what day it is."

"Thursday," he answered with a sigh. "Thursday afternoon."

"You look tired."

James nodded, and then surprised Tony by kicking off his boots and climbing in the bed. Tony remained perfectly still, as if moving might make James realize what he was doing, cause him to
change his mind. That didn’t happen, though. Once horizontal, James inched closer, slid an arm around Tony, and pulled him back against his chest, then buried his nose in Tony's hair.

He smelled distractingly wrong and Tony found himself trying to catalog the differences since they’d last held each other, as if that would provide insight as to where James had been and what he had done. Unfamiliar hair products. Cigarette smoke. Something antiseptic. Gunpowder. James sighed against the back of Tony’s neck, and he bit down on the inside of his cheek while adding hard liquor to the list.

"So. Tell me what it was like, then."

It wasn't a question, it was an order, but James didn't sound angry. He sounded almost eerily calm. Actually, it reminded Tony a bit of when he was having a shitty day and James made him sit down and explain why half of R&D needed to be fired, or why the Board hated him, or why Pepper was the only reason he wasn't destitute.

Tony swallowed, and stared at the lamp, not sure how to answer, exactly. Behind him, James shifted, brought his mouth to Tony's ear, whispered, "Antoshka."

"You don't really want to hear this, it's... the past, it doesn’t matter."

"It does. And you're telling me. Even the parts I don’t want to know. Especially those parts."

For a moment, Tony let himself think of Steve, the tiny version of him, and wondered if he was okay, or if he was crying, scared and lonely and needing Tony. Just the idea of Steve calling out for him and receiving no answer made Tony feel sick to his stomach.

"I don't know how to start," he said in a rush, but that was a lie. "When I was five I made my own Captain America costume because I thought..." he exhaled slowly, tried again. "You know, sometimes the only time he'd even talk to me was if I caught him in the right mood, or at the right amount of tipsy, and I asked for him tell me stories about you guys."

Tony must have been quiet too long, because James kissed the edge of his jaw, and made a soft, encouraging noise.

"Yeah, well, I misjudged how he'd react. He, uh, he yanked the cowl off, and grabbed my arm, dragged me back to my room and made me take it off. Then I had to give it to him, and he got rid of it."

He remembered the way he'd trembled, cold and stripped down to his underwear, holding his arm and trying desperately not to cry. His father's face had been a mask of rage as he yelled, and broke the shield over his knee, swearing he'd ship Tony away if he ever caught him doing something like that again.

"Why?" James sounded surprised.

Tony laughed, dry and humorless. "I was disgracing his memory." He bit into his lip. "Captain America stood for something, and I was making a mockery of, I don’t know. Everything."

"You were a kid, playing," James pointed out needlessly. He tightened his grip, pulled Tony closer.

"So? I was a Stark man. I shouldn't have been wasting my time on games, anyway. Not that I played very much to begin with. Less after that."

James's breathing was slow, steady, but Tony could feel the tension in the body behind him. "Sorry."
"What?" James propped himself up on his elbow. Tony could feel him staring, kept his face turned aside. "Why are you apologizing?"

"I'm making a big deal out of stupid stuff from when I was a kid. It shouldn't matter."

"You keep saying that. Antoshka, you matter, and this is part of you," James answered softly, "so it matters, too. Keep going."

Tony closed his eyes and shrugged. "I hated him a lot of the time. Captain America."

"You'd mentioned that."

"Jealousy, mostly. Dad spent so much time looking for him, or glorifying him, or just... It was either 'Stark men this, Stark men that,' and not living up to my own name, or it was 'if the Captain was here' like it was my fucking fault Steve crashed that plane. I'd already known by four that dad loved him more than me, but, that, what I just told you? That's when I started to realize I'd never be good enough. Captain America stands for everything good, and Tony is the living embodiment of disappointment."

James held him tighter. "Steve would have socked him in the jaw for that, even before the serum. Always hated bullies."

Tony smiled, ducked his head. "Yeah. I might have daydreamed about that once or twice."

James was careful to keep his voice non judgemental when he asked, "What else did you daydream about?"

This was harder, and Tony closed his eyes, clenched his jaw. "Um. Normal stuff, I guess. Like you said, he’s handsome." Tony thought of his posters. "This is really…"

But James wasn’t going to let him off the hook. "I need to know."

Tony grimaced, and shook his head, suddenly angry. "You know, I don’t remember ever grilling you about your jerk off fantasies."

"Everyone I thought of is dead," James answered, and there was an edge to his voice that only served to throw gasoline on the fire of Tony's anger.

"So was he at the time!" he snapped, trying and failing to sit up. James kept him right there, the bionic arm unmovable, and the more Tony struggled, the angrier he got, until he opened his mouth again, and...

"I don’t get how this helps you, knowing that… I had posters, okay, hidden, and I would lie there, and I’d beat off staring up at him, because he was gorgeous. All hard muscle, and tall, and perfect, and good, and I wasn’t any of those things, and I’d pretend he could see me doing it, and liked it, that maybe he’d look at me and actually see something worth looking at…” he gasped, trying once again to get out of James’s grip.

"I'd jerk off, scared to death I'd be caught, wondering if that—wanting hard muscles and cock as much as I wanted to bury my face between a woman's thighs—was why my dad hated me. I told you about being shipped off to boarding school, like he couldn't stand the sight of me, and... the thing with the prostitute, but I didn't really tell you about the boys. They all looked like him, the first cock I sucked, and the second, and all the rest all through boarding school, and the absolute asshole I let fuck me for the first time when I was fifteen, without knowing
what I was getting myself into, who wouldn’t stop when I said it hurt,” his voice cracked, and this time when he tried to get up, James let him.

Tony sat at the edge of the bed, gasping, because shit, he hadn’t thought of that in ages, and… and it was only occurring to him as he was confessing that none of this felt like the past, this all felt raw and real and like something he’d been holding onto for far too long.

James sat up beside him, began cautiously stroking his back. It was gentle, and Tony knew he could easily shrug the touch aside if he wanted, but he just ran his hands over his face, and groaned, feeling shattered, and ashamed, and…

“You were so careful with me, the first time,” James said, sounding so very, very sad. “Antoshka,” he whispered, placing his arm around Tony’s shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

Tony pushed away his tears, and ground his teeth. "Well, now you know why. I hope you're happy."

“No. Not even a little." James sounded... "I know what its like, not having a choice. Being used.”

And of course he did. Tony closed his eyes, and just like that he didn’t feel shame, he felt…

Opening his eyes again, he turned to face James, and there wasn’t pity, or disgust, or disappointment. Just sympathetic heartache, and understanding, and no judgement whatsoever, and love, and wasn’t that amazing? Wasn’t that just James all over? How many little horrors had he stumbled across in his own mind and overcome? How many ways had HYDRA tried to break him, using this amazing man to destroy lives, to ruin and hurt and…

And Tony didn’t think less of him because of what he’d done, or what he’d experienced. He thought more of him, looked at him and saw the bravest, strongest person he knew, a survivor. That’s how James was looking at him now. Like he was special, like he mattered, like he was worth looking at.

“Most of my fantasies had nothing to do with sex at all,” Tony admitted in a rush. “They were all variations on a theme. I dreamed I’d be the one to find him. I spent so many hours looking at maps, and… and plotting out possible trajectories. I was going to find him and bring him home to my dad, and maybe then he’d finally… love me. He’d have to say it then, wouldn’t he? Just once?”

James’s eyes were bright as he stroked the side of Tony’s face again.

“But he died,” Tony whispered. “And that was the end of that.”

James looked crestfallen. “Because I was forced to kill him,” he added softly.

Once upon a time, James wouldn’t have phrased it like that, wouldn’t have shifted the blame to where it belonged, would have taken it for himself. Tony was part of the reason that had changed, as were all of the Avengers, all of them working together to help him absolve himself.

It was occurring to Tony that all of the advice he’d given James since knowing him, all the encouragement to forgive himself for things that were done to him, things outside of his control… maybe that advice applied to him, too.

“Wouldn’t have mattered anyway. Knowing what I know now, I have to think that even if he felt it, he wouldn’t have said anything.” Tony shrugged. “It might have made me complacent, and he was counting on me to carry on his work.”
James kissed his temple, and said nothing. Just kept his arm around Tony, and waited, patient.

"You see what I mean though? That... That wasn't love, James, feeling like he was perfect, and I was garbage, and swinging viciously between wanting to be him, just plain wanting him, wishing he'd never been born, wishing I'd never been born. That he was the key to convincing my dad I was worth loving? That's pathetic. That's..."

"Howard's fault, not yours."

“I know, but it feels like mine.”

James looked like he wanted to travel back in time to give good old Howard that sock to the jaw. "I... I know this isn't easy for you to talk about, Antoshka. Especially with me."

Tony shrugged. "No. It's not easy, but I can’t imagine ever telling anyone else. I haven't even told therapists this shit, James. Bruce has heard tidbits here and there when I've been too shitfaced to keep my mouth shut, enough for his gorgeous brain to fill in the blanks, but I've never..."

He took a ragged breath, and let himself lean into James. The arm around him tightened, and James kissed the top of his head, and Tony wondered how he'd ever thought any of what he'd felt about Steve was actual love. This was love, right here. James was love.

"If no one ever shows you, how are you supposed to know?" James asked softly, and Tony wondered if he'd said some of that out loud.

“Steve ever tell you about the first time we met?"

James snorted. “Just that he put his foot in his mouth.” Tony smiled at this, but mostly smiled at the affection he could hear in James’s voice. He was glad his little confession hadn’t changed that any. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if his personal baggage ruined James’s friendship with Steve. “The punk was always good at that, though.”

Tony sighed. "They told me they'd found him, and it was a little like waking up in a cave hooked up to a car battery. Bit of a shock.”

James was quiet, listening, and Tony wondered if he'd slept at all since they'd last seen each other. He risked a look, and James found the ghost of an encouraging smile for him, the exhaustion stamped across his features. No rest, then.

“You should sleep,” he suggested. “My issues aren’t going anywhere, and you're running on fumes.”

James shook his head. “After. This is more important.” He gave Tony a pointed look, making it clear there was no budging him on this.

"Fine. So, yeah, they found Steve. It doesn't make any sense, but it was almost like being told they'd found Howard on ice. Like I was being given another chance to make him proud."

Tony stared at his hands again. “All that time, and all those... confused feelings, and when I finally meet him?” Tony raised his head, didn’t shy away from looking into James’s eyes. “I might as well have been five again. It was the same, right down to the look in his eyes. Like I was making a mockery of everything he stood for just by existing. Like I was something he was scraping off his boot. Said he knew guys worth ten of me. Of course, he was talking about you. The Howling Commandos, too, but mostly it was you.”
James winced, and Tony nodded. "I could only think, of course, no wonder dad likes him so much. The guy takes one look at me and decides I'm a worthless fuckup."

"He changed his mind," James pointed out.

Tony laughed at this, even though it wasn't that funny. "Yeah. Took dying to make him reconsider, though, and even then he didn't like me."

"Antoshka," James sighed, running his hand through Tony's hair. "He didn't know you, and he was hurting. I know about that; waking up and finding a different world than the one that was there when you closed your eyes."

Tony nodded. "True. And that's the point, I think. I didn't know him, either. He was always Captain America to me, not Steve Rogers."

James kept petting, and Tony relaxed a little.

"Kind of says something about me that within 24 hours of meeting him I'm flying a nuke through a wormhole in space, and while I'm up there dying all I can wonder is if I'd changed his mind. If at the end of the day he'd even notice I'd died."

James pulled him into a rough hug, saying, "Sorry," and now he was the one trying to compose himself. "I hate how matter of fact you can be about dying." He exhaled shakily, and Tony hugged him back, closed his eyes and enjoyed all that warmth, and strength, and love being wrapped around him. "Thinking how close I came to never having a chance to know you makes me want to throw up."

He opened his mouth to make a joke at his own expense, to downplay his worth, but caught himself. "Yeah, well, you make me feel like all of this shit was worth it. I wouldn’t change a thing as long as it meant I got to have you at the end of it all."

James’s breath hitched, and then Tony was being kissed, and oh, that was just what he’d needed. Bright, beautiful blue eyes drinking him in, with James’s hands cradling his face possessively. He tasted like a long night from Tony’s past—smoky with an underlying current of alcohol—but Tony doubted he tasted any better, having just woken up.

Bad taste or no, James kissed him, deeply, slowly, mapping the interior of Tony’s mouth with his tongue, fingers sliding into his hair, and Tony moaned, kissed him back, kissed until he couldn’t see through his tears, and had to pull away. Not far, just enough to rest his forehead against James’s, each of them breathing heavily.

This time, Tony took hold of James, curled his fingers around the nape of his neck, stared deep into his eyes. “I need you to know, as far as I’m concerned, I’m already married to you,” and it was a gift, seeing James smile. “I realized that a while ago, that it’d already happened in my heart, and my brain, and everywhere else. I love you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Me neither.”

“I promise, I don’t think about him the way I used to,” Tony swore, and he relaxed when he saw James believed him.

“What about before you found me?”

“When he first moved in, yes, yeah, sure. I was raw and broken from Pepper leaving, I was drinking more, and miserable, and he started being nice to me, and so yes. I thought about it.”
James cleared his throat. “Clint might’ve mentioned the miserable part.”

“How.” Tony wasn’t sure why that made him feel weird. “Didn’t realize it was that obvious.”

“Don’t know that it was,” James answered, worrying at his lower lip. “He, um. After, when I came to the Tower, he said it wasn’t until then that he saw the difference. Figured out you were faking before. Did you ever say anything to Steve?”

Tony squirmed. “No, not as such, but I sort of… Well, I got some liquid courage going, and made a move,” Tony thought of the shock he’d seen on Steve’s face after stroking his cheek. “He gave me the brush off. Of course, it’s Steve, so he wasn’t an asshole about it, or anything, just… He wasn’t interested, and we left it there. I mean, sure, I might have immediately left the country on some made up business. Might have cried, too. A lot.”

James didn’t look away, but Tony was having trouble pinning down what he was seeing in the other man’s eyes. James nodded, though, so Tony swallowed, and kept going.

“Getting rejected was actually good for me,” he swore. “I know that sounds crazy, but it helped. There I was in a hotel room, drowning my sorrows, and a news report about the Avengers came on. Cheesy as it sounds, it was epiphany time,” Tony let go of James in order to mimic an explosion with his hands, which got him a wry smile. “The team was too important, it needed to be my priority, but I was doing the same stupid shit I’ve always done, and all over a guy I still hadn’t actually bothered to get to know.”

“So you came back?”

“So I came back,” Tony agreed. “And when I did, I shoved all that other shit aside, and eventually realized I was a lot happier just having Steve Rogers for a friend.”

James was smiling now. “He’s a pretty good friend.”

“He’s a great friend.”

“Stubborn, though.”

“Uh, yeah, just a bit.” Tony was smiling now, too. “And that wry sense of humor? Smart, too, smarter than I’d given him credit for. And…I don’t know, good. He’s just… he’s so fucking good, James.”

“I miss him.”

“I know. Me too.” Tony pulled James into a hug, and they stayed that way for some time, just rocking each other back and forth.

James sighed, and relaxed in his arms, and Tony couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so light. Probably the last time he’d broken down, and James had put him back together again.

“Hey,” he murmured, disentangling himself so he could see James’s face. “You okay? I just dumped a lot on your plate.”

James took a deep breath, and exhaled. “I’m glad you did. I was coming up with some crazy scenarios,” he lowered his eyes for a moment. “The thought of him and you,” Tony watched James’s jaw shift to the side, then he raised his eyes, and within them was an intensity that made Tony’s heart race. “Even that you might think of him, or anyone else?”
“I don’t,” Tony swore. “I haven’t, not once, not since you walked into my world and turned everything on its head.”

James arched an eyebrow. “So, with what Loki told us… why would you assume this is all your fault?”

“I dunno,” Tony sighed. “A history of being blamed for everything? Guilt over having felt that way about Steve, and never having told you? I mean, knowing what you know now, can you blame me? Steve gets turned into a baby, and all he wants is me to take care of him. Me, the guy who spent his own childhood wishing he could be Captain America so his dad would love him? It’s like some weird, fucked up, karmic switcheroo, which—last I checked—is what magic is all about.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is?” James sounded hopeful, but also worn thin.

“Um, considering what a mess I’ve been, I can understand how this next part sounds like bullshit, but the truth is after we got together, I stopped thinking about it.” Tony stroked the side of James’s face. “You’re kind of distracting.”

“Tony.”

“I’m being serious. You made me happy, and, sure, the issues with my dad, that’s never stopped haunting me, but I shoved a lot of the Captain America stuff into a trunk, dumped it into the ocean, and stopped thinking about it.”

James stared at him.

“When I had my freakout on Bruce a while back, he asked me what I wanted out of my life. Even drunk off my ass, I didn’t have to think, because the only answer was you. Just you, James, I don’t need anything else as long as I have you.”

“You have me. And you’re mine, Antoshka,” and this was said low, and gravelly, emphatically, as if James was explaining one of the underlying, unflinching, unyielding principles of the universe. It was the voice of a man who would set the world on fire if need be, just to prove his point.

“Yours,” Tony agreed, and wow.

Just… wow.

That was a feeling right there. That was the best feeling. That was everything his childhood hadn’t been. All those dirty little painful secrets, dragged out into the light, and James still looked at him as if he was the bright center of the universe. Wanted him, loved him, would fight to keep him, would help hold him up when he wasn’t strong enough to stand on his own two feet, and would let Tony do the same for him.

And just like that, Tony knew that everything was going to be okay. No matter what happened with Steve, with the rest of the world, it was going to be fine, because James wasn’t going anywhere. And neither was he.

**Chapter 11**

“Bu bu!”

It was amazing to watch the fatigue and melancholy slide off of James’s face in response to Steve’s enthusiastic greeting. More gratifying still was seeing him sweep Steve up into his arms, giving him a little spin while doing it, so by the time he’d settled against James’s chest he was squealing with
“And just like that, I’m invisible,” Tony muttered, not in the least bit upset.

Tony jumped as Natasha sidled up to him. “I take it you worked things out?” she asked softly.

From across the room, Bruce was surreptitiously watching, obviously invested in the answer to that question. How lucky was he, having friends like this—family—who would take him in at crazy hours and comfort him and… Tony found himself tearing up again, and managed to surprise Natasha by pulling her into a hug.

“Thank you,” he whispered, wiping hurriedly at his eyes after letting go. “Sorry, I’m on emotional overload. Still getting used to having a family.”

“It does take getting used to,” she agreed, stroking the side of his face.

Steve was making a racket, and when Tony looked over, he found James wide eyed and staring at him. “Any idea what he’s going on about?”

The adorable little face scrunched up, as if insulted that James needed a translation since he felt himself to be perfectly capable of communicating.

“Okay, Stormageddon, what have the peasants done to upset the Dark Lord of All?”

“Any idea what he’s going on about?” James repeated, looking to Bruce this time for a Tony translation.

“It’s a nerd thing,” Bruce explained, smiling wryly.

“Well, for a start, he wants tapioca pudding, which I can get behind,” Tony explained, while Steve babbled. “He’s annoyed because Clint showed him his collection of Powerpuff Girls toys, but then wouldn’t let him play with any of them.”

“Okay, that is creepily accurate,” Clint interrupted.

“Sharing is caring, Barton,” Tony reminded him. “James, he’s happy you’re back, but he’s annoyed with me for being gone so long—sorry, Spangles. Also, he wants to change into the red shirt with the duck on it, and then go down to the gym.”

"Is he serious?" Sam asked, looking around the room.

Everyone was staring at him again. Tony rolled his eyes. It wasn't that hard, any of them could have figured it out, but they let the fact that Steve was a babbling baby over complicate the issue.

Steve clapped, and giggled, and Tony gave up and blew a raspberry on his cheek, which only led to more giggling.

“Okay, let’s tuck James in, get your wardrobe sorted, and then I’ll take you to the gym. Maybe Clint can work on the pudding for you, since he’s a meanie that doesn’t share.” Steve agreed with some of his plan, and didn’t shy away from offering alternative orders. “Okay, then Clint can get tucked in with James, and maybe Thor will make the pudding, since you asked so nice.”

Clint held up his hand. “Wait, what?”

“It would be my honor, Steven.”
“Thanks, Thor. Barton, I know you haven’t slept either, let’s go.”

That Clint followed without protest was proof enough of how tired he was.

The awkwardness didn’t settle in until they were all in the elevator together. With a sigh, Tony pulled Clint into a half hug, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Clint made a big deal of wiping his face off after, but Tony knew that actually meant he’d loved it, even if he was grumbling when he asked, “I guess this means you guys worked it out?”

“We’re squared away,” James answered. As if to prove this, he hooked an arm around Tony’s shoulders and kissed the top of his head, which was just nice.

Tony stared at their reflections. James was making faces at Steve to amuse him, while Clint yawned into his fist, and there he was standing the middle of it all. It seemed like they were different people every time he and James rode in the elevator together. So far, this was his favorite version, and so he smiled at his own reflection, and maybe, for just a second, a tiny, tiny part of him thought it’d be nice if Steve stayed this way.

The doors opened before he could think on that too much, and then he was dealing with Clint’s whining.

“Did the crib explode?” he asked, kicking at one of the pieces. In the light of day, Tony had to admit their place was a mess. The furniture was all out of sorts, and there were pillows, blankets, and crib parts strewn everywhere else.

“I was wondering about that, too.”

Tony cleared his throat, and absolutely was not embarrassed. “Look, it was inferior. Don’t worry, I’m building a better one.”

James gave him a look. “I had this place babyproofed. I expect it to be that way again by the time I wake up, and that’s an order.”

To Tony’s utter dismay, Steve backed James up, and so he added ‘clean up’ to his list of things to do. “Yessir. Now, march,” he said, herding them into the bedroom.

Tony bounced Steve on his hip, doing a little rocking back and forth motion as the two stripped down to sleep. He was about to ask how James’s side was healing up, but as soon as his shirt came off, was immediately distracted.

“Why do you two have matching bandages?”

James and Clint paused on either side of the bed, each holding a bit of the blanket, before glancing at each other, then back at Tony. He recognized the ‘caught red handed’ look when he saw it, and this was it, this was it all over.

Steve was right on board with his assessment, and filled in the blanks.

“Is he right?” Tony squeaked, setting Steve down on the bed so he could investigate.

“What’d he say?” Clint asked cautiously, signing furiously (Tony’s sign language wasn’t good enough to keep up) with James the entire time.

"He said you two got tattoos last night," he replied in what sounded a lot like a threatening tone of voice. "Did you make him get tattooed?"
"What? No, it was his idea," Clint swore.

James sighed, and pulled at the tape, lifting the bandage up enough for Tony to see the bow and arrow now decorating his right pectoral region. Clint removed his own, revealing what looked to be a M1941 Johnson rifle.

"You're both grounded, and no tapioca pudding!"

"Not fair!" Clint wailed.

"Do you hate it?"

Tony stared some more. His reaction was more kneejerk than anything. Actually, seeing the two of them standing there with their very obvious declarations of love and friendship stamped into their skin was heartwarming in a way he couldn’t quite explain. A teensy weensy bit of him was jealous that he’d missed out on it, but that was his problem.

James had been ordered to abolish his hard won sense of self, was once again being shoved into a role without having any choice in the matter. He’d been ordered to abandon his preferred style of fighting, which would require him to consciously override his instinctual responses in the thick of battle, had even cut his hair in order to masquerade as Captain America. Sure, there was no chair, no HYDRA brainwashing, or deep freeze—there was just the person he loved most ordering him to do it, which in a lot of ways made it worse.

As if that wasn’t enough to deal with, Tony had then gone and dropped his little Captain America bombshell in probably the worst possible way. When James had left the day before, it was entirely possible he’d decided that, without ever knowing it, he’d even been filling in for Steve in his own relationship with Tony.

That he’d decided to do something wildly independent, something that was for him alone, and had the added bonus of celebrating an uncomplicated by age regression or weird feelings friendship? Not surprising. Tony figured he should probably just be counting his lucky stars that James hadn’t actually gotten a tattoo of Clint’s face instead.

"No," he admitted, "no, it's actually really nice. Yours too, birdbrain." James relaxed, which in turn made Tony relax. And he wasn’t lying, either. As much as it would take getting used to, it was kind of sexy. “I hereby unground you, and award you extra portions of pudding. Now get in the fucking bed, and sleep.”

“Your bed is huge, by the way,” Clint pointed out, yawning halfway through the sentence, “why isn’t my bed this huge?”

"Do you even sleep in your bed? I remember designing you a Cloak Hammock because, and I quote, 'You expect me to sleep in a bed? That's the first place they look, Stark.' Or did I dream that?"

James was already settled into the bed, his eyes drifting closed, a little smile on his face. Steve crawled up the bed, and James started fake snoring while Steve tried to get his attention, laughing like James ignoring him was the best game in the world.

"Fair. My hammock is awesome. And portable."

"Okay, enough, sleep. That's an order."

Clint grumbled some more, but he also looked pretty comfortable, and half asleep. Tony signed 'thank you' while Clint still had his eyes open, and got a thumbs up in return.
"Come on, squirt." Tony scooped Steve up with a grunt, then leaned over to give James a kiss. Steve gave a little squeal, so James gave him one on his forehead, and then they left the two to their sleep.

Finding Steve's stuff in the mess took longer than expected, but they eventually got him changed, and in the process Tony managed to get the mess better organized and most of it back in the packaging.

Once he finished designing his superior crib, he'd have to see about selling them, and a hell of a lot cheaper than this top of the line garbage. "We could have a whole line of Stark Baby stuff, Steve, sound good? Wanna be my guinea pig?"

Steve squealed, and Tony took his hand so they could walk out together. "I thought so. You love being a Stark guinea pig."

To Tony's surprise, they found Sam down in the gym, running on a treadmill. Even more surprising, Steve seemed especially excited to see him there. He took off running (it had a bit of wobble to it, but wasn't too shabby) and Sam hopped off the treadmill to greet him.

"Hey, little man," he said, smiling when Steve collided with his legs and beamed up at him. He looked up and gave Tony a nod. "Tony."

"Sam. Looks like someone is happy to see you."

Steve agreed, babbling as he smacked Sam's legs and then took off running again, amusing himself in the way only a child could.

Sam shook his head, and walked over to join Tony. "Still feels trippy, seeing him like this."

"You haven't changed his diaper. Wiping your friend's baby-ass? Weird. I'm probably going to need therapy if I ever want to look Steve in the eyes again."

This got him a laugh, but Sam was mostly focused on their little friend.

Tony liked Sam—he was good people, and had helped Steve and James quite a bit—but he'd always gotten the feeling Sam didn't feel the same about him. This wasn't so strange, really, he tended to rub people the wrong way all the time, but as an honorary Avenger, Sam was different from all the other people who disliked Tony.

He'd been invited to live in the Tower, but passed, preferring to keep his own place, which Tony could respect. Outside of a few post battle dinners, he tended to steer clear of Tony altogether. It felt strange, and not at all a coincidence that he'd run into him now, after announcing they'd be going to the gym.

Tony watched Steve, who was having a blast slapping his palms against the bottom of the punching bag, and couldn't help himself; he pulled out his phone and grabbed some video. When he finished up he found Sam watching him, a smile on his face.

"You seem to be all over this."

Tony shoved his phone back in his pocket, embarrassed and uncomfortable. "You missed the really fun breakdowns."

Sam refocused his attention on Steve, shifting to stand beside Tony. "Still. Bucky seemed a bit better today, too."
"Mm hmm."

"Guessing you don't really wanna talk about it?"

"Nope." Tony ran a hand over his face, frowning. "All I've been doing is talking about it. Kinda over that at this point."

"Makes sense. Any idea when all this'll go back to normal?"

Tony shrugged. "Might be permanent. It's up to Steve. Hey, buddy, don't try to eat the weights!" Steve giggled and toddled back over to the punching bag. "Thank you, cupcake."

"What's the plan if that happens?"

Tony sighed, scrubbed a hand through his hair, and tried to remember Sam hadn't been around for everything. He wasn't second guessing, he was only concerned for their mutual friend.

"We get him a birth certificate, social security card, James and I adopt him, and raise him."

"With you as Iron Man and him as Captain America?"

"At first, anyway. We can't just stop."

Sam nodded, folded his arms across his chest. "How about someone else adopting him, giving him a chance at a normal life?"

Tony felt his heart lurch, his pulse beginning to race, thought of being sent away at seven, and the years leading up to it, knowing it was only a matter of time. How every time his dad's expression darkened, he'd thought, "this is it." Tony thought of Steve's face lighting up when he saw them, of the way he cried when Tony went away, and felt sick to his stomach.

"I understand you mean well, and I get that you think I'm a self serving piece of shit, but there is no way I would do that to him. He's counting on me, and he's Steve, not some outdated bit of technology! You don't just send a kid away because it's hard."

Sam's hand was warm when he placed it on Tony's arm. "Hold up a minute," he said softly, glancing over at Steve. "I'm just playing Devil's advocate here, not passing any judgements. It's clear that boy loves you, both of you, but we're not exactly living the safest of lives. And I don't like people putting words in my mouth, either. I ever call you self serving?"

Tony's mouth quirked to the side. "No, but it's obvious you don't like me."

To his absolute surprise, Sam looked embarrassed. "That's... It isn't that I don't like you."

"It's fine, most people don't, you're in good company. At least you don't pretend, which I appreciate."

Sam stared at him, and shook his head. "He talks about you a lot, you know."

"Huh?"

"Steve," Sam clarified, widening his eyes a bit, as if that was supposed to mean something.

"Okay?" Tony stared. Then something occurred to him. "That's why you don't like me, because of what Steve's told you? Huh. Makes sense. Pretty sure I disappoint him a lot of the time."
"Man, that's impressive."

Tony was beginning to feel like they should be having their conversation in the ring. "Look, it's been a long couple days, and I just... I get it. No one would willingly put me in charge of a kid, but for whatever reason, he's counting on me, and I'm not going to let him down, or pass him off, I'm going to take care of him, and show him he's loved, and..."

Sam was waving his hands. "Tony, slow down, I'm not criticizing you! I'm... Look, you're doing a great job. I mean that."

"Then what the fuck do you want from me?" Tony asked, spreading his arms wide in exasperation.

"Anyone ever tell you go out of your way to twist things around? Turn compliments into insults, questions into accusations?"

Tony shifted uncomfortably. He'd been working on that since meeting James, thought he was doing a bit better, at least, but the last few days had really worn him down.

"I don't really know you, man, I mostly got my impressions second hand, so I think this is the first time it's clicked for me."

"Congratulations." It sounded far more hostile than Tony intended it to be, and he winced, pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sorry."

"Tony, what I'm trying to say is, I like Steve. A lot. And he spends most of his time talking about you, so as a result I may or may not have been a bit standoffish with you."

"He talks about you a lot, too, you know? How you're such a good friend, and..." Sam smiled and ducked his head and suddenly Tony felt like an absolute idiot, the pieces falling into place. "Shit. You didn't mean that kind of like, did you?"

"Now you get it."

Tony stared, and stared, and stared some more, then looked over at Steve, and back to Sam. "Does he know?"

Sam shook his head. "Nah. Like I said, he mostly talks about you. Not sure how I'm supposed to compete with Tony Stark."

Tony laughed. He didn’t mean to, it just happened, and he felt bad once he saw the look on Sam’s face. “No, shit, I’m sorry, this isn’t actually funny, just,” he wiped at his eyes, and fought off another chuckle. “If you had any idea how I’d spent my morning... that right there, the idea that anyone would be jealous of me when it comes to Steve? Very funny.”

Sam stared at him, his expression shifting into surprise.

“For what it’s worth, I can see it working with you two,” Tony offered, because he could. Sam was the same sort of deep down good that Steve was, had more than proven himself to be a loyal friend. “If he’s even into guys, that is. Not really sure where he stands on that.”

Sam’s eyes widened further, and he shook his head, looking away. Tony got the feeling he had a lot more to say, but had decided to keep quiet, which was fine by him. He was sick of talking about feelings, anyway.

Steve let out a baby war cry, and took off running with more enthusiasm than balance, surprising
himself a moment later when he fell, hard. Tony was over there in an instant to help him up, tousling Steve’s hair, and saying, “You’re fine,” before Steve began bawling. He whined, and Tony dropped down to look at the little hands being offered up as evidence of injury. “Hmm, I don’t see anything,” he mused, dropping a kiss into each of Steve’s palms after looking them over. “Guess you’re too tough, huh?”

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupted, “Dr. Banner informs me he’s made a breakthrough, and hopes you and Baby Rogers might stop by the lab at your earliest convenience.”

“Hear that? Time to go visit Bruce. Let's go say goodbye to Sam.”

Tony took Steve's hand and they walked over to an uncomfortable looking Sam. Tony felt bad—he knew what it was like, wanting something you thought you couldn't have.

"Hey, sorry I suck at normal human interaction," he said, extending his hand when they reached Sam. "Maybe we could try again when I'm not suffering from an emotional hangover?"

Sam shook his hand. "Name the time and place." He let go of Tony's hand and crouched down to say goodbye to Steve. "See you later, little man." He held his hand up and Steve gave him a high five.

Tony scooped Steve back up into his arms, gave him a kiss on his forehead, and headed for the door, throwing Sam a wave over his shoulder.

Chapter 12

"And we should..."

"Huh. How 'bout that." Tony folded his arms and studied the swirling colors surrounding Steve's little figure on their displays. "They look different to you?"

Bruce nodded, while Thor crossed his arms and scowled. "They do, but the change is an expected one."

Tony sighed, feeling an odd compulsion to smoke a cigarette, which was unexpected; he hadn't had a smoke since his twenties. He thought of the smoke he'd smelled on James earlier, figured that was to blame, and then found himself curious as to whether James had actually been the one doing the smoking.

If he was being honest, his curiosity over how James and Clint had spent their evening was only growing. Of course, he was going to keep his mouth shut and get right the hell over that. Considering what he'd been putting the guy through lately, he'd more than earned a night of secrets.

Steve was happily eating blueberries and smiling at him, and Tony smiled back. He had bigger things to worry about, needed to focus.

"So you're saying the time tears or whatever you want to call them are repairing at an expected rate?"

Thor stroked his beard, and leaned closer. "Loki would know for certain, though he will not offer us more information than he has already."

"Are there color shifts we'd expect to see when we're running out of time?" Bruce asked.

"Blues."
"Hey, idea. Can we scan someone with a normal relationship with time for comparison?"

Bruce nodded. "Sure. Thanks for volunteering."

Tony handed Steve off to Thor, then hopped up onto the table, waiting for Bruce to make his adjustments. "You look surprisingly at ease with a kid in your arms," he remarked, because oddly enough Thor did. Or maybe it was simply the fact that he and Steve looked like they could be related.

Thor beamed. "I hope to have many of my own."

Tony opened his mouth to ask if that was possible, considering Jane wasn't Asgardian, but promptly shut it again.

He supposed it shouldn’t surprise him to hear Thor’s easy, heartfelt answer, and really, it didn’t surprise him so much as leave him with an uncomfortable sensation he’d only be able to classify as jealousy, if he was being completely honest with himself.

Despite the insanity that was his adopted brother, out of all of them, Thor likely had the most normal, happy upbringing. Maybe if you had loving parents and could fly (without needing a badass Iron Man suit) the idea of being responsible for another human life to that extent wasn’t the stuff of nightmares.

Bruce finished typing with a flourish, interrupting Tony's thoughts. “Okay. Would you say this is normal?”

Thor bounced Steve in his arms, and leaned closer to the displays. “I would indeed.”

Bruce spun one of the displays around so Tony could see. Sure enough, he was surrounded by similarly swirling colors, but they were all cool, calm blues. It looked nothing like the angry mishmash of colors Steve had around him, which was probably good.

“Right, so let’s check him daily, and see if we can measure and extrapolate based upon that, ballpark a figure for how much time we have?” Bruce was already nodding, fingers flying, and Tony relaxed infinitesimally.

“Of course, we’re hoping it’s consistent,” Bruce felt the need to add, and Tony grimaced, because he’d been thinking the same thing.

“Well, let’s not worry about that unless we have to,” Tony said, hopping off the table. “Thor, feel free to throw some guesses our way.”

“I fear they are of little use,” Thor answered after a moment. “It could be anywhere from days to months.”

Tony frowned, and shared a look with Bruce. “Alright. Give me my baby back, then, if you don’t mind.” He ignored the looks this got him, and helped himself to Steve. “Let’s just plan as if we’re in for the long haul, then. We’ve got a crib to finish, soldier.”

He wasn’t stupid, he could tell Bruce wanted to talk, but he just wasn’t in the mood. He was beginning to come to terms with the understanding that none of this was something they could control, or fix. Every instinct he had told him they needed to stop fighting this, and just embrace it.

Maybe Thor saw that in his eyes, had some understanding of what was going through his head, because he clapped Tony on the shoulder, and smiled approvingly. “Follow your instincts, my
friend.”

Which, hey, if a demi-god was cheering you on, you couldn’t be doing it all wrong. So back down to the workshop they went, stopping along the way to load up on snacks, and coffee.

When they arrived, he was somewhat surprised to see the Baby Cap enclosure he’d built the day before was loaded up with paper and various art supplies. He had no recollection of putting them there.

“Guess that happened while I was out of it?”

“Indeed,” JARVIS answered hesitantly. “How are you feeling, sir?”

“Not bad, actually,” he admitted, doing some quick rearranging so that Steve could get busy with the fingerpaints. At the last minute, he swooped in and removed the duck shirt, not wanting it to get ruined. “Maybe even good.” He thought of James, and grinned wildly. “Fuck that. Great, JARVIS, I’m feeling kind of great.”

Steve lectured him on his language, because even as a baby he was a hypocrite, but he was Tony’s hypocrite, so he let it slide. He ruffled Steve’s hair, then did it again after the little guy giggled.

Big blue eyes stared up at him, leaving Tony paralyzed, torn between his work and the hopeful look on the little face.

"We should probably fuel up first," he suggested, gesturing toward the pile of snacks they’d brought with them.

It was obviously an excuse to put off work in order to spend more time with Steve, which was kind of ridiculous, considering they were the only ones there. He wasn’t sure who he was trying to fool—Steve or himself.

"You know what? There’s nothing wrong with enjoying taking care of you.” Steve burbled his agreement, pointing out that if he was going to thoroughly commit himself to enjoying being a kid again, it only made sense for Tony to try to have fun with it, too. “Agreed. So let’s do this! Snack time, then you can help me make a fingerpainting masterpiece.”

Steve clapped, a clear sign of approval, so that was that. Decision made, he let go of the misplaced guilt, and gave himself permission to have fun. All told, Tony spent about an hour just relaxing and painting with Steve before finally feeling ready to pick up where he’d left off.

“I want something suitable for framing,” he instructed before having JARVIS turn on the music. Of course, it was a little less heavy, and at a much lower volume than normal, which was unsettling for all of ten minutes before he started preparing to ask JARVIS to turn it up so he could become properly engrossed in his work.

Tony pretty quickly decided to go an entirely different direction with his Cap Crib, scrapping everything he had and starting over. It should have taken no time at all, but this wasn’t like his typical day in the workshop. He couldn’t just block everything out completely, considering his company. Tony remembered all too well what it felt like, desperately vying for his father’s attention, and there was no way he was doing that to Steve.

So he didn’t.

He let himself fairly consistently get happily distracted along the way, either climbing back into the enclosure in order to look at Steve’s paintings, or to help him clean off his messy hands so he could
use another color (Steve was an artist, he didn’t want the greens mixed in with his reds), or to change a diaper (less fun), have another snack, or show him the progress being made on his crib.

Tony loved talking about his projects and showing off, so working alongside his (literally) captive audience was thoroughly enjoyable. Steve was happy, and carefree, and maybe there was something to Thor’s theory about childhood being healing after all. Even at his happiest, their Steve tended to have a tenseness about his shoulders, as if he was carrying the weight of the world there. And in a lot of ways, Tony supposed he was.

But this Steve was reveling in his lack of responsibility, happily making a mess of everything in a way Tony absolutely approved of, laughing to himself as they spent the rest of the day working and playing together.

There was something unspeakably satisfying in watching Steve gaze up at the holographic 3D representations of his future crib, chubby little arms reaching to interact with the interface, face lit up in wonder. And, oddly enough, there was equal satisfaction on Tony’s part when Steve finished one of his paintings, and explained what was going on with all the colorful blobs on the paper.

So, really, it was no surprise that by the time James wandered in with an amazing looking sandwich, Tony had fingerpaint in his hair, and probably some other places too, and Steve was actively stomping his little feet up and down on a big sheet of paper, leaving green footprints behind.

“Do I even wanna know?”

“Bu bu!”

“He’s making something for Hulk,” Tony explained, snagging the sandwich and taking a big bite. "Mm, I love you."

"Love you, too."

Tony shoved more food into his mouth, and winked. "I was talking to the sandwich, actually, but come to think of it, you're alright, too."

This got him a playful smack to the head, and a low, throaty chuckle. James looked good in a way he hadn’t since before Steve went and got himself de-aged. It was obvious he could use some more sleep, but he’d shaved, and showered, and the new haircut was really, really working for him.

There was just the right amount of affection and exasperation in his eyes when he smiled at the two of them, handing Tony the empty plate before picking Steve up. “Hey, punk,” he said, giving Steve a little squeeze. “You been keeping him out of trouble for me?”

James’s eyes shifted, meeting Tony’s own, and oh, that was a look, alright. A sort of smouldering, lovesick look that made Tony’s heart skip a beat. James's eyes had a mischievous glint to them, and he seemed not to care that Steve was getting his white t-shirt all covered with paint. Tony just wanted to freeze time, stare at the two of them like that for at least a couple hours.

Wiping his hands off on one of the rags nearby, Tony set down his sandwich, fished out his phone, and did the next best thing.

“You’re a sap,” James accused, but he didn’t really sound like he was protesting.

“And how.” Tony snapped a photo, then one or two or half a dozen more, so by the time he took the last one, James had his chin tucked down, was trying to hide his smile in Steve’s hair.
“I finished his crib,” Tony announced, shoving the phone back in his pocket, and tucking back into his sandwich. “So, you know, we can have our living room back.”

“Stevie, you sign off on the fabrication?” James received a lengthy reply, and grinned, his eyes shifting to make contact with Tony’s own again and again, like looking away hurt him. “Is that a fact?”

Tony grinned back, popped the last bite of food in his mouth, began cleaning up the fingerpaints. “You actually get all that?”

“I’m guessing you made it hotrod red like the armor.”

“Good guess.”

“How about I give Steve a bath, get him changed, while you clean up here,” James suggested, “then we can maybe relax. It’s movie night.”

Tony hopped to his feet, reluctant to be parted from either of them. “Um, if you give me a minute we could just do that together?” James looked like he was going to protest. “I know you can do it on your own, it’s not that.”

He wasn’t sure how to explain the odd, desperate desire to hold onto each and every little moment where the three of them got to pretend to be a family. Steve wasn’t going to be this way forever, and he and James didn’t want kids, so this was it, really, his one chance to play dad, and it was really, really strange how important that was feeling at the moment.

Thankfully, the furrow between James’s brows had already smoothed away, and he was smiling again. “It’ll be more fun with you, anyway.”

Tony picked up the pace, getting everything cleaned up as best he could, setting aside all but two of the paintings, carefully carrying the dried masterpieces Steve had created. He held up the one covered with red and gold man-shaped smears, and signed with a red and blue handprint.

“Is that Iron Man?” James asked taking it off Tony’s hands, holding it up so he could look at it closer. “Nice job, Stevie.”

“The, uh, dark blob with the blue blob is you and Steve,” Tony pointed out. “I’m going to frame that one. This one is for Clint.” James stared at it, eyebrows scrunchedin confusion, and Tony mouthed, “I have no fucking idea,” because really, it was a bunch of colorful smears on paper, but whatever. For all he knew it represented Clint’s relationship with maturity.

“I’m sure Clint will love it,” James answered smoothly, making a face when he was sure Steve couldn’t see him. Tony laughed, a real one, a happy one, smiling so hard his face hurt, watching as Steve dropped his head onto James’s shoulder, little hand grabbing a fistful of t-shirt. It took a great deal of restraint not to take another photo.

The elevator doors slid open, and he let them exit first, heart hammering in his chest. After the week they’d had, the happiness felt dangerous, and volatile, something that was going to consume him from within and leave a burnt out husk in its wake.

“Too bad we don’t have any bath toys,” James lamented, setting the Iron Man painting down on the coffee table once they were inside.

“J, wanna put in an order?” Tony called. “Some other toys, too, and maybe some more age appropriate art supplies. We’re going to run out at this rate. And a nightlight.”
“Of course, sir.”

James headed straight for the bathroom, Tony hot on his heels, accepting the baby trade off once they were inside so that James could get the water running.

Even though he spent a lot of time with his hair pulled back, it was still strange to see him so clean cut and exposed, and Tony had to wonder if James was even aware he had no hair to hide the odd expression on his face.

“What’s up, soldier?”

He looked up guiltily, then back down at the tub. “Nothing.” Tony waited, didn’t have to wait long. “Actually, no. It’s not nothing. J, order a wagon, too. One of the good old fashioned ones.”

“I’ll admit, not what I was expecting.”

James shrugged, scratched the back of his neck, a sheepish, almost embarrassed gesture that reminded Tony of Steve. “Might be fun, taking him for a ride.”

“Add one Radio Flyer to the list, JARVIS.”

James smiled, tried to hide it, but failed, as JARVIS said, “Already done.”

Tony set Steve down, pausing to make a face at himself in the mirror upon seeing the new painted look he was sporting. He was definitely going to need a shower of his own when they were done with Steve. With a shrug, he plopped down on the floor, helped James get Steve out of his pants and diaper and into the tub, where the real fun began.

“Is there a trick to this I don’t know about,” Tony asked five minutes later. He was soaking wet, and Steve was only partially clean, but shrieking happily as he splashed around in the tub. James took one look at him, and burst out laughing, a heartfelt, deep, beautiful laugh. “How the hell are you still dry? This isn’t fair. Splash him, Cap!”

Steve squealed, and did just that, so that James got a faceful of water, and it was Tony’s turn to laugh. Things just went downhill from there, until it looked like there was more water outside of the tub than in, everyone was soaking wet, and Tony’s sides ached from laughing.

“We’re awful at this,” James wheezed, trying to rinse shampoo out of Steve’s hair without drowning him or getting anything in his eyes.

“Personally, I think we’re awesome,” Tony countered.

James gave him a look at that, strangely vulnerable, his white shirt with splotches of color clinging to his skin, and he was just so beautiful in the moment that Tony wanted to push him onto the floor and, oh, hello, apparently that thought had come through loud and clear, because James made a soft, surprised sound, licked his lower lip.

It only lasted a moment, though, his attention diverted by Steve, and finishing up the bath. “Since you’re convinced we’re awesome, you can be the one to clean up.”

“Sure, fine, punish me for my optimism.”

His solution was to throw many, many towels at the puddles, and then watch while James got Steve dried off.
“I’m just going to wash the rest of the paint out of my hair.”

James stood up, a bundled Steve cradled on his left, while he grabbed Tony and pulled him in close on his right. James helped himself to a kiss, smiling one of his devastating smiles when he was done.

“Don’t keep us waiting too long,” he ordered, rubbing their noses together before letting go.

“Alright, Stevie, let’s just go straight to pajamas.”

Tony decided to be responsible, so he finished mopping up the water properly before hopping in the shower, giving himself a quick wash. He manfully resisted the temptation to jerk off, but regretted his decision, because when he walked into the bedroom he found a dressed Steve jumping on their bed, and the tortuous sight of a shirtless James in the process of pulling on a dry pair of pants.

“Incredibly unfair,” he grumbled, trying and failing to stop ogling his fiancé. Which, yes, he did find himself grinning like an idiot over being able to use that word, even if it was only in his own mind.

“You’re the one walking around wearing only a towel,” James pointed out, switching to Russian. “If only we weren’t so responsible, Antoshka,” he added, shaking his head and trailing off.

Tony grinned, and headed into his criminally large closet in order to pick out some clothes. He went for exceedingly comfortable, tugging on an old pair of jeans with the knees blown out, and a soft gray shirt, then went to join up with James and Steve.

They gathered up some extra diapers, James handing Steve off to Tony as they headed back downstairs for movie night.

“You know... I think we’re actually doing okay,” James announced in the elevator, an arm around Tony’s shoulders.

"Don't sound so surprised. We adapt, we overcome," Tony rambled, blowing a raspberry on Steve's cheek, "we kick ass."

“I get the feeling you’ve decided to act like this is permanent,” and this was said in Russian, which meant he was trying to keep Steve out of the conversation. “Am I crazy, or do you know something I don’t?”

Tony sighed. “Well, we finally have a monitoring device of sorts. Can’t really pin down just how long we have, not yet anyway.” He bounced Steve in his arms, and leaned heavily against James’s side. “I guess... After talking with you about everything, it was a little easier to take a step back. Think about what Loki actually said.”

“That Steve’s the only one who can fix this.”

“Yeah, exactly. And, in the kitchen, after, Thor said something to me about, um, childhood, and how maybe that’d be something some people wanted to relive.”

James tightened his grip, pressed his mouth against Tony’s temple. “Guessing that never occurred to you, huh?”

He snorted. “Nope. Not so much.” The elevator began to slow as they approached their floor. “I, can you hold it for a second?” They shuddered to a stop, and Tony shifted so he could look into James's eyes. “I know this is insane, and it isn’t what either of us imagined for ourselves, but for the time being, let’s just... let’s just go with it.”

James studied his face for a moment, vulnerable and nervous. “Just be a family?”
“We’re all already a family, right?” Tony pointed out. “If being a kid again is going to help Steve do whatever it is he needs to do, chances are it’ll work faster if he feels loved and taken care of. And I can’t really think of anyone more qualified than us to do that for him. Can you?”

Steve grabbed for Tony’s mouth, complaining about all the Russian, and something in James’s eyes softened. He stroked Steve’s back, and shook his head. When he answered, it was in English. “Don’t want it to be anyone else. Feels like I’ve been taking care of this punk his entire life.”

“Alright then?”

"Yeah. Yeah, okay."

James’s smile was a little more certain this time, as he pressed a kiss to each of their foreheads. JARVIS took this as his cue, let the elevator resume its progress, and a moment later they strolled out together to join the rest of their family for movie night.

Chapter 13

SEX!!

In deference to Steve, they weren’t watching anything loaded up with violence, or sex. Clint spent a good twenty minutes trying to convince them that Blade Runner was practically a kid's movie, but once Bruce hesitantly suggested The Muppets Take Manhattan Clint was all over it.

Bucky spent the first twenty minutes or so of the movie feeding Steve some pudding, while Tony documented the experience. At the rate he was going, he'd be able to put together a whole baby album. Maybe he’d have some printed up, keep them around the Tower for when Steve was being too serious. Tony could flip it open, and show him the picture of Bucky—with a diaper clutched in one hand, mind you—running after a half naked Steve, cheer him right up.

"What're you grinning at over there?"

Tony sighed contentedly at the feeling of James's fingers carding through his hair, tips dragging over skin, massaging his scalp.

With a shrug, Tony slouched down a bit more. He and James were occupying their customary loveseat, but Steve was nestled between them, little legs wiggling and bouncing with excess energy where they were draped over James's own.

"Just happy."

Steve squirmed a bit, burrowing against Tony even more than he already was, one little fist holding onto James’s shirt, as if worried he was going to try to leave. Didn’t seem like that was happening any time soon. He was smiling, shuffled even closer, scooping Steve up and onto his lap, then rested his head on Tony’s shoulder.

“Me too, oddly enough,” he whispered. “Maybe we’d make better dads than we thought.”

Tony snorted, earning himself an arched eyebrow. “You, sure, but I’m not even going to pretend I’m not ‘mom’ in this little arrangement.” James burst out laughing at this, face pressed into Steve’s hair to help stifle the noise. “Ha ha, laugh it up.”

It was a gift, seeing James smiling and laughing again, made Tony think his instincts were on the
money. Maybe they all needed to just go with the flow where Steve’s baby condition was concerned. If he thought on it too long, it was still overwhelming and terrifying, but at that particular moment it was good. Great even.

“You’ve got the mom powers, alright,” James agreed. “We’re still taking bets over how your baby translations work.”

“Observation, deduction, a good memory,” Tony rambled, bringing his mouth closer to James’s ear and talking softly so as not to disturb the others. “Guesswork? A little bullshit? I dunno, it all makes sense in the moment.”

James's laugh was hardly audible, but Tony could feel the vibrations of it where James shook against his side. "To you, sure."

"I want a World's Best Mom mug," Tony whispered. James continued to snicker. "I'm serious, you should take this seriously."

James shifted around again until he could pull Tony into a slightly awkward kiss. It was like an electric shock running through his body, left him breathless and hungry. It's been too long, his body ached for James, and...

If the look in James's eyes was any indication, he wasn't the only one. James's cheeks flushed as he licked his lips, staring at Tony's mouth, then into his eyes.

And all of a sudden, it just hit him in a way it hadn't before, the understanding that James was it for him, was the rest of his life in a way that wasn't even a little terrifying. It was exhilarating, it was a little like flying into that building all over again, the one he’d flown into the day he and James came to their entirely mature decision to give this craziness a shot.

Tony didn't want to know how his life would have turned out if that day had gone differently. He lacked the ability to confidently state he'd have been okay, without James. It was tough, he was biased—all he could see were all the ways in which James had made him stronger, better. There was no arguing the happier aspect, but all the rest? He couldn't see himself confronting his demons without knowing James was there to help him through it.

Here he was watching a Muppets movie with a one year old Steve Rogers, and feeling happy. That was kind of insane. Just a couple days before the same idea had him fishing under the couch for his emergency bottle of booze, and now the idea of having a drink was the farthest thing from his mind.

And all of that was because of James.

"I love you," Tony said, wrapping his fingers around the back of James's neck, pulling him into another kiss.

"Love you, too," James answered, his smile a bit dirty when they pulled apart. He switched into Russian, whispered, "We need to get naked tonight."

"Definitely. Absolutely. Hell, give Steve to Sam, or even Clint, I don't care. Let's go!"

James laughed, settled back down against Tony's side. "No, we're doing the parent thing, remember? Later. Another hour or so won't kill us."

"It might," Tony argued, but James wasn't budging.

Which was okay, really. It was good. He glanced around the room, smiling to himself. Bruce was
staring longingly at Natasha, who was seated in a chair by herself, so as not to raise suspicion. Sam and Thor were on the couch with Bruce, Thor watching the Muppets with a look of childlike wonder on his face. Clint was sprawled on the floor in front of Natasha's chair, propped up enough that she could run her fingers through his hair.

"Uh, I'm sure you all know by now—we love to gossip—but, James and I are getting married."

"Congratulations, Anthony! James!" Thor bellowed over the rest of the team. "You must let me throw you a celebratory feast in honor of your nuptials."

"Thanks, Thor," James answered, grinning up at Tony.

"Have a date yet?" Sam asked.

"We're waiting to see how things play out with Stevie. I'd like him to be my best man," and this was said to the person in question.

Big blue eyes stared up at them, a smile on Steve's face as he squealed, laughing and shrieking, "Bu bu!" when James tickled him.

"Hear that? We're waiting on you, little guy." Tony leaned over and blew a raspberry on Steve's cheek, keeping the giggling going.

When he looked up again, there was a strange look in Sam's eyes, but a moment later it was gone, Sam smiling again. Tony tried to imagine how he would feel if—back when they were still flirting around the idea of being something to each other—James had managed to get himself de-aged. Not only would it have been kind of creepy, and weird, and awkward, it would have left him feeling incredibly lonely. Even before, he'd begun filling his empty moments with James, wanting. Hoping.

Tony kissed the top of Steve’s head, and then James’s for good measure. Felt guilty for enjoying having this tiny version of Steve to snuggle, while he wondered if Steve had any idea how much the grown up version of him was missed.

Maybe they’d need to start showing him.

+  

“Shh,” Tony hissed, pressing his hand over James’s mouth. “Super hearing!”

James grabbed hold of him and yanked, sending Tony sprawling onto the bed on top of him with a little yelp of surprise, which, okay, he couldn’t really complain about that. Especially not when James manhandled him until their mouths could connect, and kissed him again.

Tony shifted until he was straddling James, choking back some noises of his own when strong hands grabbed his ass, squeezing and using the hold on him to rock them together. James sucked on his tongue, pulling away a moment later to drag his mouth along Tony’s jaw, whispering, “You should soundproof the bedroom.”

They shook with quiet shared laughter, James smiling up at him in a way that made Tony feel incredibly lucky. “I’ll put that on my to-do list,” Tony promised, kissing him again, and again, until James made another of those low, throaty noises of pleasure, rolling his hips. “Shh.”

James slid a hand up under Tony’s shirt, used the other to pull him into another kiss. It was dirty and wonderful, just the right kind of desperate and hungry, until they were just grinding against each other, and holding on tight enough to leave bruises.
Tony couldn’t get over the hair, or lack thereof, had to get a fistful of it, tug until James hissed and let Tony kiss and suck hungrily at his neck and jaw and earlobe. He could feel the thick outline of James’s cock, rocked his own against it, caught James’s moan with his own mouth. Strong arms wound around him, and they grappled for a moment until they were face to face on their sides, tangled together and shoving roughly at each other’s clothing.

It felt like it’d been years, rather than a handful of days, years and years of being deprived of touch and taste and the feeling of James in his arms. Tony felt drunk on the sensation, especially when James wrestled him out of his shirt, throwing his own across the room with it, and they were skin against skin.

Their breathing sounded incredibly loud, and Tony wondered if that alone would be enough to wake Steve, put an end to all of this before it could really begin, was so distracted by this concern that it caught him by surprise when James licked into his ear, then whispered, “I wanna get fucked so bad, Antoshka, but there’s no way I’ll be able to stay quiet.”

Tony groaned against James’s shoulder, running his hands over every bit of James that was bared. “It’s been ages since I’ve come,” he dragged his tongue along James’s collarbone. “I’m not going to last very long, anyway.”

James chuckled at this, even as his fingers began working at unbuttoning Tony’s pants. He was already flushed, his pupils blown, mouth puffy from the kissing. Tony wanted to devour him.

“How are you so beautiful?” Tony hissed, shaking his head.

James just grinned at him, and tugged at his zipper. “How are you so dressed?” he whispered, yanking Tony’s pants down over his hips, then off in one efficient movement. While James refocused on removing his own pants, Tony took care of his underwear, tossing it across the room with the rest of the clothes.

He hardly had time to appreciate the view before he was being pulled in close, strong hands sliding down his back, over his ass, squeezing and kneading even as James brought them crashing together. Tony had a hand back in James’s hair, the other curled around his neck, kissed him roughly, trying to muffle their noises of pleasure as skin slid hotly against skin, James’s hard cock butting up against his own, setting his nerves on fire.

Tony loved fucking, loved being fucked, sucking, rimming, stroking, all of it, but sometimes it was a blast to just rub up against someone like a wild, sex-starved madman, until just you came all over them in a hot rush. Luckily, James was also a fan, which was why ninety-eight percent of the time showering together quickly degraded into frottage instead of actually getting clean.

He would have loved the time and luxury of sliding his cock into James’s criminally tight ass, but there was no way that was happening without one or the other of them accidentally waking Steve. This, though, shoving James down onto the bed, climbing on top of him, and lining their cocks up before grinding against him? This they could theoretically get away with. James grabbed for his hips, guiding Tony’s movements, head thrown back in pleasure, a whine of annoyance escaping when Tony stopped, until he saw the intermission involved grabbing lube.

James rocked his hips, his cock sliding along the underside of Tony’s own even as he watched Tony flip the top open and pour a little lube out onto his hand. With a grin, he began working it down and over each of them, stroking, squeezing. James held out his own hand, grinning wolfishly up at Tony, waggling his fingers demandingly until some was squirted there, as well.
With a grunt, Tony found himself pulled down into a slow, deep kiss, while James's slick fingers wrapped around their cocks, just stroking a few times before he stopped, just kept his hand wrapped tightly around them.

Tony sighed, thrust into James's hand, their foreheads pressed together as they stared down at themselves. James was all gorgeous, hard muscle, lit blue by the glow of the arc reactor, his stomach rising and falling rapidly in time with his hectic breathing. Tony let his gaze wander, momentarily distracted by the newness of the tattoo, which looked to be almost healed already.

"Kiss me," James whispered, pumping once, twice, squeezing around the heads of their cocks, making Tony see stars.

So Tony kissed him, hungrily, panting into James's mouth, his entire body alive and tingling with pleasure. He flicked his thumbs over James's nipples, then pinched, lightly twisted them, smiling at the way this made James tremble beneath him. He did it again, and again, until James was whimpering, and his hand began stroking them again.

Tony stared down into James's eyes, feeling centered for the first time in a long time. Feeling like life was getting back to normal, finally. Relief washed through him, even as James's hand slid over his ass, metal finger stroking teasingly between the cheeks.

"I love you," James mouthed against his cheek, their sweat slick bodies rubbing frantically against each other.

"Mm, James," he hissed, biting and sucking greedily at his neck, "I love you, too. Can't wait to fuck you again."

"We need that vacation," James said, his voice breaking as he swallowed a whimper. "You and me on Sexperiment Island, with like a gallon of lube."

Tony kissed him again, shaking with laughter. "Yes, please," he sighed.

"M'gonna make a list," James whispered, his eyes bright and beautiful. "Day one is just, oh, tongues."

"Oh, yeah, lick you everywhere," Tony agreed. He twisted James's nipples once more, then slid his hand down to join in the fun. "Taste everywhere. Make you beg me."

"Not if I get you begging first," James giggled, dragging his teeth over Tony's chin. "Day two we can add in, ah, sucking."

There was something to be said for having to keep quiet; it added to the urgency in a rather spectacular way. Tony struggled against a groan of pleasure. He was close, could feel James throbbing against him, in his hand, and let go, pushed James's hand away, too.

"Punk!"

Tony grabbed his face, and kissed him quiet, letting James take control of the rhythm, his strong hands guiding Tony's movements as they writhed together. Slick, hot skin, cock against cock, and his tongue in James's mouth.

"Antoshka," James growled, pulling away, biting into his own lip as he rocked, and thrust up against Tony, fingers digging into Tony's skin, and then his mouth fell open in a wordless cry, and he began emptying himself.
Tony pushed back enough to watch, taking hold of James and pumping his cock, stroking and milking him through the end of his orgasm, the body beneath his tense, and still spasming with pleasure.

James reached for him, but Tony batted his hands aside, just thrust down into the puddle of come decorating James's chest, hissing his pleasure, crying out in surprise when a cool metal finger snuck around to push into his ass. That was it, he was gone, so, so wonderfully gone, coming so hard that it kind of hurt, but in the best possible way, splattering the underside of James’s chin—which, yes, so fucking hot—strong hands holding onto him as he came, and came, and came.

As soon as Tony finished, James yanked him down into the mess so they could kiss again, and then they were both giggling, and trying to keep quiet, and not doing a particularly good job at it.

James flipped them, and to Tony's utter delight and surprise, began licking him clean, starting with his chest and working his way down, carefully slipping his lips down over the head of Tony's oversensitized cock, pushing his tongue against the slit, gathering the last little bits of come, while Tony covered his mouth with his hands and tried not to make too much noise.

When he was done, James stretched beside him, and Tony wasn't even that surprised to see him already back at half mast. That happened sometimes, the best possible side effect of whatever knockoff version of the serum HYDRA had used on him.

Tony crooked his finger, and James knelt above him, keeping his sticky skin clear of Tony’s while they kissed again. Slow, lazy, teasing kisses, Tony licking the taste of their release out of James's mouth with a sigh. Slowly, James shifted so he was lying beside Tony, pulled him in close, legs tangled together as Tony reached down and took James in hand, stroking him back to full hardness.

"Dunno 'bout you, but I feel much better," James whispered, kissing the tip of Tony's nose.

"Mm, you feel great," Tony agreed, squeezing the head of James's cock, and making his eyes flutter closed momentarily. "Think you can keep a lid on it if I go down on you?"

"Let's find out," James suggested.

But he kept a hold on Tony, wouldn't let him up for a moment, just kissed between his eyes, his cheeks, along his jaw, then worked his way back to Tony’s mouth. A teasing play of lips and teeth and tongue, and Tony found himself so relaxed he was tempted to close his eyes and fall asleep like that.

Tony nipped at his lower lip, changing up his stroke, dragging his lips along James's lightly stubbled jaw on the way to his ear. "I want your cock in my mouth," he murmured, tugging at James's earlobe. "Wanna make you come again," and James shuddered, his hips beginning to move as he thrust into Tony's hand.

This time, he let Tony up, allowed himself to be rolled onto his back, sighing his pleasure when Tony spent a bit of time licking his nipples, teasing them with teeth, and tongue, brushing his lips back and forth against them until James was pink in the face.

He grabbed a handful of Tony's hair, and pushed, making Tony giggle. He allowed James to guide him down and down, then kissed the head of his cock. Licked across and around, swirling his tongue, teasing with his lips.

James let go of his hair, which was a bummer, but he was just grabbing pillows to shove beneath him so he could have a better view. Tony approved, spreading James's thighs and settling down between
them, looking up at the beautiful man he was going to marry, and winking before lowering his eyes again.

He was admittedly biased, but he thought James's cock was absolutely mouth wateringly gorgeous. He'd been up close and personal with quite a few in his day—some larger, some thicker, or smaller, with more of a lean, or uncircumcised—but he hadn't ever felt quite such an attachment to another man's dick before.

"Gorgeous," Tony whispered, licking and sucking around the base before dipping lower and showing James's balls some love.

"You're gorgeous, Antoshka," he heard, the metal fingers returning to play with his hair. "Can't wait to marry you."

Tony grinned, his heart picking up the pace. "Know what kind of wedding you want?"

"The intimate kind. Just the family. But with dancing," he sighed.

He teased behind James's balls with his tongue, slowly licking his way back up to the head of his cock before finally sucking him into his mouth. Tony's eyes fluttered closed, and he groaned much louder than he'd intended.

James gave his hair a tug of admonishment. "If we gotta stop cause you wake up Stevie," he began, but never finished, because Tony started sucking his cock with great enthusiasm.

Sighing, spreading his legs farther apart, James guided Tony's movements with the hand in his hair; he knew full well that (with someone he trusted) Tony loved this particular give and take, loved the feeling of James pushing into his throat, loved being filled, got off on the wet, desperate noises, the smell and taste of James everywhere.

Tony braced himself on an elbow, then slid a finger up into his mouth alongside James's cock, getting it slick with spit. James's breathing hitched, because he knew exactly where that finger was going, and changed the angle of his hips, drawing his knees up in anticipation.

Normally, he might tease, but Tony was waiting to hear a cry, or a noise, or for JARVIS to just announce that Steve was wide awake again, and he wanted James to come in his mouth before that happened.

Without any preamble, he worked his finger into James ass, and began hammering his prostate. James surged up with a cry, slapping his hands over his mouth to smother the noise, before grabbing Tony's hair again, and fucking up into his mouth almost roughly.

It was perfect, and he could feel his own body fighting his exhaustion in an attempt to respond, as he allowed himself to get blissed out on James, working him hard, and hungry, and desperate until a cool hand slid down to his face, and stroked lovingly.

He looked up, and James was smiling down at him, lower lip caught between his teeth. Tony maintained eye contact, knowing that was something that James got off on in a big way. Tony worked a second finger into his ass, watching James's mouth open, lower lip trembling, his chest heaving as he worked himself into a frenzy, fucking himself on Tony's fingers, while simultaneously thrusting into the heat and suction of his mouth.

James's thighs were shaking, and he'd gone and pulled some sort of tawdry romance novel cover pose, his head thrown back, a hand at his mouth to muffle the sounds. He was beautiful, and all for Tony, all for him to take to pieces. What a fucking gift.
With a cry of pleasure, James tensed, held onto Tony for dear life, and fucked into his mouth with wild abandon, coming down his throat, gasping, shaking, and brat that he was Tony just kept sucking, and working his fingers, until James whined, "Fuck, Antoshka!"

And, sure enough, there was a loud, surprised sob from the other room. Unable to help himself, Tony burst into hysterics, disentangling himself from James, who just blinked up at him stupidly.

"Okay, I might actually be cleaner than you," Tony wheezed, "I'll go handle this." He stumbled out of the bed, managed not to smash his face against the floor this time, and rushed into the bathroom to wash his hands. "J, patch me to the nursery?"

The crying was louder, and Tony sighed, scrubbed at himself as quickly as possible. "Hey, my little Captain," he said soothingly, "I'm on my way, hold on, okay?"

The sobbing segued into sniffling, and a forlorn, "On?"

"Yeah, buttercup, I'm almost there, it's okay."

When he swept out of the bathroom, James was ready with pajama bottoms and one of his shirts, a sheepish smile on his face. "Sorry. I'm gonna shower, then I'll take over so you can get some sleep, okay?"

Tony grabbed the clothes, pulled them on hastily, then kissed James. "Love you."

He gave James's ass a smack, grinning over his shoulder to watch James rub his bottom and flip him off as he bustled out of their room, and into Steve's. He was standing in the crib, lower lip sticking out pathetically, looking miserable.

Without being asked, JARVIS brought up the lights a bit, and Tony smiled. Sure, he was tired, and would have rather just flopped down next to James and slept the sleep of the sexually triumphant, but this wasn't so bad, really.

"On!"

"Yup, I'm right here," Tony said, lowering the side and lifting him out of the crib. "Sorry we woke you up. I know you're a super baby and all, but it'd be great if you'd go back to sleep for a while."

Steve snuggled up against Tony’s chest, and he plopped down on the chair they’d dragged in. James had been using the room as a meditation space, so there was very little furniture in there, but one wall was decorated with a half finished mural Steve had been painting for him. Brooklyn as it looked back in the day, as seen from an old building Steve and his Bucky would spend hours sitting atop, dreaming together, never knowing what the future had in store for them.

“See that?” Tony asked, kissing Steve’s forehead. “You’ve got unfinished business, Cap. I can sit in here with him, but it’s not the same—he needs you, the real you, to come back. No rush, just… once you’re ready, okay? We love and miss you, Steve Rogers.”

The blue eyes looking up at him seemed sadder than they should, so Tony just shut his mouth, and held on tight.

“When you’re ready, baby,” he whispered as Steve began to nod off, “it’ll be better this time, I promise.”
**Chapter 14**

“That’s bluer.” Tony felt a strange bottom dropping out sensation. “Right? Or… No. That’s definitely a lot more blue.”

Bruce was grimacing, his jaw tight. He gave a curt nod. “About sixty-three percent more than our initial reading, to be precise.”

Tony’s eyes widened, and he mouthed the number to himself, the arc reactor momentarily feeling huge and heavy in his chest. Steve stared at him, and Tony felt exactly like he was drowning in blue. The blue glow of the reactor, the blue swirling in the air around Steve on the displays, the blue of those bright, trusting, innocent eyes.

He knew all about drowning. About being held under, struggling, fighting against the instinctive, primal need to suck in air. Funny how your body still fought you on that bit of common sense, even if all inhaling was going to get you was closer to death.

Hand shaking, he used it to cover his mouth, closed his eyes, needing to block it all out for a moment. Bruce’s hand was warm against his back, fingers splayed between Tony’s shoulder blades as if to hold him upright.

When he could talk, he asked, “Do you feel this way about the color green?”

“I don’t know, how are you feeling?”

Tony giggled. “Like throwing up.”

“Mm. Less like puking, more like punching.”

Warm, strong fingers, keeping him steady. Bruce had lovely hands (he’d always thought so, at least) and Tony disliked the idea of him damaging them by punching something. Disliked the mental imagery of Bruce with swollen, bruised knuckles.

"That's a twenty-seven percent increase in less than twenty-four hours," Bruce said after a moment. "The day before was twelve point eight percent. Tony, we have no way of knowing if we'll have another period of stabilization, or if what we're looking at is an end-cycle rapid acceleration."

"I know."

Tony swallowed, and decided now was as good a time as any. He leaned over and pulled up a command line, then began typing with shaking hands, Bruce leaning over his shoulder and reading along.

A huge part of me wants him to stay like this.

Bruce looked at him, eyes wide, then glanced over at Steve, who was happily playing with the holographic game Tony had built for him.

Yes I know how awful that is. Tony Stark = Selfish Fucking Asshole!!!

The hand tensed against his back, and Tony forced himself to look at Bruce. There was sympathy there, not anger, which was something at least.

I've seen you with him. That's not selfishness. It's love.
A laugh fought its way past his lips, and Tony allowed Bruce to pull him into a half hug.

The last few weeks had been interesting. No distracting emergencies, or freak alien attacks to occupy their time. Just Steve, and James, and something like a routine. Something like a normal life. He’d always thought it would be impossible to fit anything else (anyone else) into his schedule, but to his utter surprise, it worked.

They started their mornings earlier than he’d like, but if they timed it just right they could shower together, share toothpaste flavored kisses, and jerk each other off to start the day right. He had some interesting bruises from their various shower sessions, always managing to crack an elbow or knee against the tile while coming against James’s slick, soapy skin.

They took turns with Steve in the mornings, getting his stuff together, getting him dressed, and changed, and fed. If he was heading for the workshop, Steve came along, but Tony had returned to work at SI, not wanting to leave Pepper in the lurch. When he was in the office, Steve spent his time with James, the two of them sending Tony little videos to brighten his day.

He’d even gotten down to R&D a few times, mostly to nerd out with Peter, who had everything under control, much to Tony’s delight. It was strange, interacting with people outside of the immediate circle of trust; he’d caught himself time and time again preparing to show Peter photos of Steve.

Pepper had put together a solid story involving the death of a distant relative of Tony’s that had resulted in the fair haired, blue eyed boy coming to live with him. If they needed it, they’d be ready, and after getting hitched, the world would meet Steven Stark, legally adopted son of James and Tony Stark. Tony had all the fake documentation and expensive paperwork in his office, maybe spent more time than he should looking at it when he should be focusing on other things.

James and Natasha had been running them all through drills, with the little Captain supervising. In the evenings, Tony joined in so he’d be as ready as any of them when the inevitable call to assemble came through.

As a result, they’d reached a point where it felt almost normal to see dark hair when Captain America’s helmet came off. James was wearing the uniform like he was meant to, was confident and relaxed on the comms, was a fucking marvel with the shield, and was no longer fighting angry.

Steve seemed happy, and relaxed, and each day when Tony and Bruce measured him he’d shown only tiny, consistent progress. Nothing remarkable. Steady, stable, and so Tony had allowed himself to relax into their new life. It wasn't that Tony had forgotten they were operating on borrowed time, it was just that there hadn't been quite as much of a sense of urgency.

He hadn’t lost the plot entirely, either. In an attempt to help Steve heal, Tony had implemented Operation Steve Appreciation. He’d set up a schedule for each member of the team to have one on one time with Steve. They could spend the time interacting how they wished, as long as they used part of it to explicitly tell Steve how much the grown up version of him was missed.

The first few attempts hadn't lasted longer than ten minutes due to Steve screaming bloody murder until Tony or James showed up, but they’d all kept at it, some of them having more success than others, until Steve was comfortable with all of them, and everyone was able to have their hour of Cap time.

Tony wasn’t sure what his friends had been saying to Steve—he wasn’t even sure exactly what James had told their fearless leader—but what mattered was that Steve kept hearing he was missed. Steve Rogers, not Captain America.
Coincidentally, this resulted in him and James having a little more private time together, even if it was just an hour here and there. The first time they'd made it past the fifteen minute mark, he and James had stood in their living room, unsure what to do with themselves until the hour was almost up, and Tony realized they were almost out of alone time. He'd dropped to his knees, and licked his lips, and watched James's eyes take on a hungry, needy glint.

They'd been more prepared after that, so that as soon as Steve was picked up, they were on each other like wild, starved creatures. Tony wasn't sure James had ever fucked him that hard and desperate before without one of them having almost died in a battle first. He had dark lovebites hiding beneath his clothing, fingertip shaped bruises on his hips, and carpet burn.

He wasn't any better, though. On one occasion he'd already had James bent over the arm of the couch, pants down around his ankles and Tony's tongue in his ass when—two minutes after leaving—Thor had knocked on the door to grab the diaper bag he'd forgotten to bring along.

Half the time they didn't even bother undressing, just shoved clothing out of the way. Sometimes they didn't even make it that far. Tony wasn't sure James had ever fucked him that hard and desperate before without one of them having almost died in a battle first. He had dark lovebites hiding beneath his clothing, fingertip shaped bruises on his hips, and carpet burn.

As surreal as it seemed, once they'd finished ravaging each other and were left tangled together sweaty, sated, and stinking of sex, they typically just held each other and anxiously awaited Steve's return.

"Want to stay in, just the three of us tonight?" James asked.

His voice was like a rough rumble, all raspy and ragged around the edges. It made Tony shudder with appreciation to hear it. Just minutes before, he'd had Tony's hands tangled in his hair, had deep throated Tony's cock until he was gagging, groaning loud, and filthy, and jerking himself off while doing it. Tony could only gasp and shake while watching and holding on to James for dear life.

"Sure. Battle ducks during bath time?"

James had grinned, pressed a kiss against Tony's throat. "Sounds great."

Because this—taking care of Steve—had somehow become normal. Not just normal. Wonderful. Surprisingly satisfying. It'd become their life.

Tony looked over, found Steve smiling at him, all warmth and trust and love, and he wanted to cry. He wanted to grab Steve, call James, and run away somewhere that would mean it was okay to just keep going on like they had been.

But Steve wasn't their child. It didn't matter that Tony and James fed him, bathed him, played with him, changed him, took turns getting up when he couldn't sleep through the night. The world didn't care that Tony sang to him every day, or lived in an expensive suite covered with fingerprint art. It didn't matter that he'd become addicted to the weight of Steve curled against his chest, or burying his nose in Steve's soft, sweet scented hair.

Steve wasn't his son, he was their friend, he was Captain America, and...

"Can you watch him for a minute?" Tony asked, squeezing Bruce's hand and smiling a very fake smile at Steve.

"Tony..."
"Five minutes," Tony insisted, ruffling Steve's hair and kissing his forehead and not looking Bruce in the eye.

He all but ran into the hallway, took a shuddering breath, remembered who he was dealing with, and then got in the elevator, not wanting Steve to hear him. "Up. Just go up," he gasped.

Tony managed to wait until they were three floors up before he slid down the wall, wrapped his arms around his knees, and began shaking, gasping for air, the panic gripping him hard.

"Sir, may I call..."

"Yes, please, let him know not to come, just," he pressed his hands against his chest. "Hearing him?"

JARVIS didn't need anything else. Moments later, James's voice came through the speaker in the elevator, calm and even.

"Antoshka," James said softly, "exhale, nice and slow," and just like that, he could move air through his lungs again. "Nice and slow."

Ragged still, but it was air. "We're running out of time," he gasped, biting down hard into his lip to stop the sob.

"Shh, you don't need to worry about that right this minute," James insisted. "Let me worry about that. Want me to go pick him up?"

"Yeah," Tony squeezed his eyes shut. "Don't want him to see me like this."

"It's okay. Tonight, it's an Avengers slumber party," James said. "We'll talk to him as a group. Waffles for dinner. We can braid Thor's hair."

Tony burst out laughing, and if there were tears in there, too, then no one needed to know. “Can… before that, can we have a bit of time, just the three of us?”

“Definitely,” James answered. “You, and me, and Stevie. I’ll make us some lunch. Then we’ll all have a nap together.”

Tony nodded, then laughed at himself, because James couldn’t exactly hear him nodding his head. “Good, yes, that sounds great.”

“Head on home, Antoshka,” he said softly, and his voice was like a caress. “Head into the bedroom. I’ll be up with him, but I’ll make sure he doesn’t see you until you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

The elevator continued up, and up, taking him home, James saying, “I love you, Antoshka,” and, “it’s gonna be okay.”

It wasn’t going to be okay, though. Something had shifted and broken inside of him, and as a result, he could no longer contain the varied and conflicting feelings fighting for dominance. His chest felt hollowed out, which was kind of hilarious, because technically at least part of it was.

He hadn’t said it to James. Hadn’t said it out loud even to himself. He’d only been able to type it at the blinking command prompt, Bruce’s hand anchoring him as his understanding of himself tilted wildly on its axis, leaving him spinning out of control.

Maybe it’d always been there. Maybe that was the true source of the panic, right from the beginning.
“Is this something you wanted?”

James had asked, and he had answered with a resounding no, and James had been relieved, and they had laughed, but…

But.

There was a difference between not wanting something and being scared shitless by something. Before, it had all seemed to make perfect sense. In ways that left him angry and sick to his stomach with shame, Tony understood that he was too much like his father to be trusted with that sort of responsibility. Only, Steve had changed that somehow. It might not have been something he wanted, not at the time he’d been asked, but now?

There was a knock at the door.

“Yup, come on in,” he answered, wiping at his eyes.

The door opened, Steve peeking around it with wide eyes, face cracking into a smile as he squealed happily and took off running. James was right behind him, trying to suppress his own smile, grabbed Steve under the arms and lifted him up onto the bed, where he promptly threw himself at Tony.

“Hi, cupcake,” Tony sighed, closing his eyes and holding Steve tight. “I missed you.”

James plopped down onto the bed beside him, the smile sliding off of his face. “Antoshka?”

“It could be tomorrow, or it could be two hours from now,” he answered in Russian, sighing at the feeling of James’s fingers in his hair. “He’ll either come back to us, or… stay. Like this.”

James shifted closer, tugging until Tony and Steve were both in his arms. Tony felt a kiss pressed against his forehead. “I know… this will sound awful, Antoshka, but part of me doesn’t want it to end,” James whispered into Tony’s ear.

Tony’s eyes snapped open, and he tilted his head up, crushed his mouth against James’s, relief and sorrow rushing through him. They held onto Steve, and Tony laughed, even though he wanted to cry. “Me too,” he gasped, and James kissed him again, hard. “Fuck, James, me too, I don’t…” and again, so as to silence him.

“We have him right now,” James said, leaning down to kiss the top of Steve’s head. “Let’s pretend while we still can.”

So they did. They settled down more comfortably, Steve sandwiched between them, and watched him nap, holding onto him and each other tightly, as if afraid to let go.

At some point, Tony dozed, waking again at the feeling of James climbing out of the bed.

“Sorry. Natasha calls. Are you…?”

Tony rubbed his eyes and nodded. Steve was already wiggling with excess energy, refueled from his nap and ready to play. “M’gonna take him down into the workshop for a little bit. The, ah, slumber party?”

James laughed, dropping a kiss on each of their foreheads. “I’ll make the arrangements. See you in a couple hours?”

Twenty minutes later, they were downstairs together, Steve running around the now babyproofed
workshop (and oh how Pepper’s mind had been blown over that when she’d visited), saying hishellos to U and DUM-E before JARVIS activated one of his many holographic games.

“What should we work on today, babyface?” Steve seemed to have no answer. “How aboutsomething for Steve Rogers?”

Steve’s eyes lit up, and he clapped in the air, making one of the digital llamas in his game explodeinto twenty smaller llamas. Another game wasn’t what Tony was thinking about at all, though. Theywere running out of time, and he needed to stop being such a goddamned hypocrite.

“Nope, sorry,” he answered, rolling his shoulders. He flipped through his files, digging down untilhe got to Steve’s folder. The grown up Steve. Swallowing around his sadness, Tony pulled up thelast thing he’d been working on for one of his best friends.

“Check it out, Cap,” he said, exploding the view so little Steve could get a better look. “Do youremember? The last time we all had dinner together, you whined about how I always carry youbridal style? I was thinking of something that’d make it easier for you to, ah, ride me. Wait, thatsounds dirty,” he muttered, zooming in on part of Steve’s uniform. “My apologies, Mon Capitaine.”

Just because, Tony left a holographic representation of the shield floating in the air nearby as heworked. It felt right. Music played softly in the background, until he was humming along, getting inthe zone, Steve no longer exploding digital llamas, content to watch him work instead.

“If this were a different kind of day, you and I would be having a real conversation right now,” Tonysaid, brows drawn together in a little furrow. “You used to sit right over there all the time, sketching,chatting. That was… I think you kept me sane, after Pepper left. Don’t know if I ever said thank youfor that.”

Steve burbled sadly, and Tony paused in his work, stared down into his blue eyes. There wassomething different there, and it wasn’t just his imagination. No matter how hard he tried, no matterwho told him otherwise, every instinct he had told him that this, all of this, was his fault.

“I hurt you, didn’t I?” Steve stared at him, and Tony knew that he was right. Whatever it was Steveneeded to heal, or get over, it was because of him.

Heart seizing up in pain, Tony crouched down so he’d be at eye level. “Steve. I let you down,somehow, or—I don’t know how I hurt you—but whatever it was, or is, I would never do iton purpose. We both know I’m a colossal fuck up, and…”

To his surprise, Steve burst into tears. It was so sudden, and so forceful that Tony was temporarilyparalyzed. Steve ran at him, little hands scrunched up in fists, face twisted up in pain, and threw hisarms around Tony’s neck, hugging tightly.

Tony swept him up in his arms, held him tight. “Hey, okay,” he crooned, “I’m sorry, I... Shh, comeon, calm down, sweetie.”

Sighing, Tony rocked him, feeling sick with guilt. Whatever he’d done…

One song ended, and another began, the sound of a record, the lonely, staticy sound of a guitar,followed by a dropping out sensation as he realized what was playing. He’d accuse JARVIS ofdoing it on purpose, but he’d built the playlist ages ago, and this was just the next track. Whichmeant he’d known this song was in the mix, had done this to himself.

It was playing quietly, quiet enough to comfortably talk over. Quiet enough to sing over. And he sung to Steve every day, so this didn’t need to mean anything at all. Even if it did. Pink Floyd played
in the background, Tony began to sing, Steve tucked against his chest, the crying slowly subsiding as he sang.

And it was fine, didn’t even hurt until the very last verse, which was when Tony’s voice broke, and he had to force the words out, even as he loosened his hold on Steve so that he could look right into his big blue eyes as he sang.

How I wish, how I wish you were here.

We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year.

Running over the same old ground.

What have we found?

The same old fears.

Wish you were here.

Tony opened his mouth, finally ready to say everything he’d been trying and failing to say every day since Operation Steve Appreciation had begun. Everyone else had been following protocol, letting Steve know that the real him, the grown up Steve Rogers, was missed. Everyone except Tony.

Because Tony had been a selfish fuck instead, had been too busy enjoying being Steve’s parent. He’d told Steve he was loved, told him all day long, but he’d been talking about the little boy currently in his arms. Which was stupid, because the truth was… he missed his friend. There was a gaping hole in his world, Steve’s absence like a knife in his heart, and he needed to tell Steve that, now, while there was still a chance to get him back. As much as he didn’t want to give up the little family they’d built, he’d never forgive himself if Steve…

“Interesting choice for a lullaby.” Tony jumped, spun on his heels, trying to collect himself. “Sorry, thought you heard me come in.”

“Hey, Sam,” Tony swallowed past his guilt and heartache. “Uh, guessing it’s time for waffles?”

“Something like that.” There was a strange expression on Sam’s face. “You okay?”

Tony nodded, and let go of Steve, watched him run over to take Sam’s hand. “Fine. Hungry.”

Sam studied him as he closed out his files and turned off the music, but didn’t say a word as they headed up to the common floor. It was oddly awkward, and uncomfortable, and he slammed a hand down on the stop button.

“You know, don’t you?” Sam blinked, eyes widening, and that was a yes. “This is my fault, and you know why, and yet you’re not saying anything.”

Sam shook his head. “Not my place to talk.”

“We’re running out of time,” Tony shouted, exasperated. “How can you…”

“Hey, time or no, I’m not betraying his trust,” Sam snapped, jabbing a finger into Tony’s chest, “and you don’t get to guilt trip me for being a good friend.”

“Good friend?” Tony sputtered, not believing what he was hearing. “I can’t fix him if you won’t tell me what’s broken!”
Steve burst into tears again, and Tony groaned, reaching for him, but Sam was there first, sweeping Steve up into his arms.

“He’s a person, Stark, not one of your machines,” he said softly, a hand curled possessively around Steve’s back. “You can’t just fix people like that.”

Sam reached around him and smacked the button so that they continued on, his eyes flashing dangerously for the short remainder of the elevator ride. Tony tried to will his heart rate to lower, feeling lost, and confused, and conflicted.

When he looked into Steve’s blue eyes, though, mostly he just felt ashamed of himself. By the time the doors slid open, he’d looked away, sick with guilt.

[ Need a lullaby? Give a listen to the Pink Floyd song Tony sang to baby Steve. ]

**Chapter 15**

James took one look at him when he stepped out of the elevator, and knew something was up. Tony just shook his head, not wanting to get into it.

Of course, Sam seemed to have a different plan entirely. He handed Steve off to James, then whirled on Tony. Only, he didn't look mad, he looked somewhat mortified.

"Can I have five minutes, out on the balcony?" he asked. Everyone carefully avoided looking at the two of them, and Tony considered going with his first instinct, which was to tell Sam to get ben. One look at Steve's sad little eyes changed his mind.

"Sure."

Once they were out there, Sam sighed, ran a hand over his hair. "Look, I'm sorry. That was," he trailed off, shook his head. "Uncalled for," he eventually went with.

Tony felt a little of his defensiveness slip away. Anyone looking would be able to pick up on how uncomfortable Sam was. "No, I get it. You care about him."

"Yeah, I do," Sam sighed, leaning against the railing, arms folded across his chest. "But so do you."

They shifted uncomfortably, until Tony cleared his throat, dared to look up from his shoes again. "Sam..."

"I don't know if telling you what I know will make things better, or worse," Sam blurted. "Which is why I've been keeping my mouth shut."

Tony nodded, looked back through the glass. James wasn’t even pretending not to be watching them, Steve wrapped up safe in his arms. Steve must have said something, because James dragged his eyes away from Tony, looked down and cracked a brilliant smile, answering. Seeing it made Tony's heart lurch, so he turned aside, refocused on Sam.

"It's not just betraying his trust—he'd forgive me for talking out of turn if I was doing it to try to help him—it's the idea that saying something might hurt the people he cares about. That? He'd never forgive himself for that."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, and exhaled slowly. "Right. And considering his current state, that sounds like pretty good motivation to remain a toddler."
When he opened his eyes again, Sam was watching him. "Exactly. So I don't know what to do, Tony. What I know? It doesn't have a solution. There isn't anything for you to do with the information, except tell him you know..."

"Which gets us right back where we started," Tony interrupted. Sam nodded at him, and sighed. "Damn."

Tony scratched at his beard, let the faint sounds of the city wash over him. He wanted to know—of course he did, how could he not—but at the same time...

"Don't tell me," he decided, wondering if he'd just made a horrible mistake. "He can tell me himself when he's back. If he wants."

Sam exhaled, relief evident in the way the tension left his body, and Tony felt bad for him, wondered how many times he'd had this argument with himself. Scared to speak, but equally scared to remain silent.

"If you change your mind—think it'll help at all—or..."

"Yeah, I'll ask then," Tony agreed. "You're a good friend, Sam. I know he cares about you. And I'm sorry, because I feel like I've made a mess of this for you."

Sam shook his head, eyes narrowing. "No, man, this isn't on you. Some assholes messing with things they don't understand caused this mess. We're just dealing with the fallout."

Tony shrugged, but he couldn’t deny that it was nice to hear. Especially from Sam. “Same as it ever was.”

Sam snorted, then cleared his throat. "Tony. I don't know if any of the others have come right out and said it, but you're good at this," he gestured toward the group, to where Steve was watching them from the safety of James's arms. "Both of you. It's entirely possible the best thing for Steve is having a second chance at life as your kid. I don't know. I'm just selfish, I guess, because I miss him, the man he was."

"Me too," Tony answered on an exhale, clasping Sam's shoulder. "I'm not giving up on him. Are you?"

Sam smiled, and it was a little sad, a little beaten down, but Tony's was probably the same. "Hells no."

"Right. So. We're having an Avengers slumber party tonight. We're going to make it clear to him he's running out of time."

"Yeah, Bucky said. About that; any idea how much time we have left?"

Tony thought of the blue swirling around Steve, his stomach clenching. "It's not behaving in a consistent manner, so we don't really have any way of knowing. If you want my best guess, the answer is not a lot."

Sam nodded, arms tightening around his chest as he studied Tony's profile. "Do you think he actually understands what we've been saying?"

Tony thought of the look in Steve's eyes earlier, of the way he'd responded when Tony had begun blaming himself. "Yeah. I'm almost positive."
Sam surprised him by pulling him into a quick hug, which Tony returned albeit a bit awkwardly. When they pulled apart, Sam worried at his lower lip, then said, "Order him."

Tony's insides did a little flip flop. "What?"

"He'll listen to you," Sam insisted. "It might not always seem like it from where you're standing, but he listens to you more than anyone else. If you order him to come back?" He shrugged, looked away. "Might be worth a shot, anyway."

Tony swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. Sam nodded, clapped him on his shoulder again, then headed back inside. Tony watched him leave, but then turned to look out over the city, his heart racing for reasons he couldn't explain.

Except...

He scrubbed a hand over his face and shoved his thoughts down and down before they could surface, because it was crazy, too crazy to contemplate.

Tony felt a bit more in control of himself by the time James joined him, his hand warm when he curled it around the back of Tony's neck.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Tony lied reflexively, then caught himself. "Well, no, not really, but between me and Sam, yeah, it's okay."

"And the rest?"

"I don't know anymore," Tony answered truthfully. "Honestly, you're the only thing I'm sure of right now."

James stood with him, arm around Tony's waist, looking out over the city. "We gotta let him go," he whispered, and just like that there was no pretending anymore.

"I know," Tony answered, momentarily struggling with a sensation akin to being stuck in free fall.

He'd been there before, spinning out of control, plummeting, left to flail and fight and... But this wasn't anything the suit could protect him from. It wasn't something JARVIS could compensate for.

It was just his heart breaking.

The time had finally come, and so Tony gave up. Let the fight wash right out of him, leaving him feeling emptied, hollowed. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, let the pain and loss wash through him.

When he spoke again, he sounded determined. "I know."

James studied his profile for a moment, pressed a kiss to Tony's temple. He could feel the weight of the things they wanted to say to each other, but keeping quiet was safer. They could mourn together later, when it was all over.

Tony nodded, looked down at his hands. "Let's have waffles."

Of course, with the way their luck went, it should have come as no surprise that they’d just finished up cooking the first batch of waffles when a frantic Maria Hill called.
"Not sure what we’re dealing with yet. Whatever these things are, they’re tearing up the city!"

“Oh, come on!” Clint shouted, throwing down his fork. “Are you kidding me?”

“Yeah, that about sums it up,” Tony agreed, shoving a still too hot waffle into his mouth. “Ah, ah!” He exhaled around the steaming food while scooping Steve up out of his high chair.

"Bring your plate,” James suggested, clapping Clint on his shoulder. James grabbed Tony’s arm, fingers digging into the skin as he looked down into Tony’s eyes. “Coincidence?”

Tony worried at his lower lip, because he’d been wondering the same thing. “No idea.”

“If this is gonna work, we both need to go.” James’s eyes shifted, focusing on Steve. “Sorry, Stevie,” he sighed, stroking a hand over the top of Steve’s head before kissing his forehead. “Time to assemble.”

“Bu bu?”

James shook his head, jaw tight. “I’m Captain America now, remember?” He gave Steve another kiss, then planted one on Tony as well, switching to Russian. “I know Pepper would do her best, but…”

“I was thinking Sam,” Tony answered, already on the same page. “Go. I’ll be right behind you.”

James nodded, then wrapped them up tight, holding them safe in his arms for a minute before saying, “I love you both,” and running off after the team.

"Sam, wait," Tony called, and this wasn’t going to be awkward at all, nope, not even a little bit. "I need you to take Steve."

"What?"

Tony scrubbed a hand through his hair, and grimaced. "Look, no time to argue. Gear up, but keep Steve with you. You're staying in the Tower. If we need to, we'll call you in, but..."

Sam had a right to look disappointed. He’d bent over backwards to accommodate the team, attending every practice session, all with the understanding that he’d be called on to serve.

"Right now, keeping up appearances is important, so I can’t spare any of the others,” Tony explained in a rush. “I know this seems like... like a glorified babysitting assignment, but you’re the only other person I trust to keep him safe.”

Sam opened his mouth to protest, but maybe he saw the way Tony’s hands were shaking, or the fear in his eyes. "Shit. What're you thinking?"

"I'm thinking someone found out, and they're luring us away in order to get their hands on a baby super soldier," Tony said, squeezing Steve tighter. "Maybe that’s just my paranoia, but either way, I don't know if James and I can do this unless we know he's safe. So can I count on you or not?"

Sam nodded, his expression set and serious, and Tony knew he'd fight to his last breath if that's what it took. "Yeah, I got him."

"Thank you." Tony kissed Steve again, gave him another hug, then handed him over. "Mommy has to go be a superhero right now," he said, regretting the joke as soon as it left his mouth.

Steve reached for him, making a soft, desperate noise, and Tony felt sick. For all he knew, this
would be the last time they saw each other, and the idea of leaving Steve behind just killed him. He glanced at Sam, but there wasn't any judgement in his brown eyes, just sadness. Sympathy.

"On," Steve wailed, little grabby hands in full effect, eyes welling up with tears. "No, no, no!"

Tony cupped his chubby little face in his hands. "Steve. You heard your Bu Bu. Time to assemble. You know I have to go. I don't want to, I have to. Because this is what we do, right, you and me? We fight the good fight. I wish you were coming with me, but you're staying here with Sam. He’ll take you to the safe room and JARVIS will give you a feed so you can keep an eye on us from there, okay?"

"Sir," JARVIS interrupted.

"I know, J." Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat, but allowed himself one last hug. "I love you Steve Rogers," he said against the top of Steve’s head. He handed him back to Sam, nodded.

Walking away was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do, and considering how his life had turned out, that was saying a lot.

He shook, felt like he was being torn in two as he watched Steve’s face scrunch up in misery, crying and reaching for him as the elevator doors slid shut. Tony wanted to run back to Steve, stay with him, but knew he couldn’t.

“This is why.” Tony said, staring at his reflection in the elevator doors. “JARVIS, do me a favor? Remind me of this if later on I get any stupid ideas about being allowed to have a family.”

Maybe this—the all encompassing gutted feeling—was why his own father had kept his distance.

He’d always assumed Howard was disappointed by him, or just plain didn’t love him, but what if it had just hurt too much? What if distancing himself, or hiding at the bottom of a bottle was the only way he could handle doing what needed to be done, while still coping with the reality of being a father?

Tony shifted uncomfortably, rushed out of the elevator, trying to push the idea aside as he suited up, but it stuck with him nonetheless.

If Steve stayed as he was, it was only a matter of time before Tony let him down, hurt him spectacularly. Fucked his life right up. Maybe he wasn’t as bad at the hands on stuff as he’d suspected he’d be, but he was still committed to playing superhero, which meant his life—the lives of everyone he loved—was almost constantly in danger.

A strange loneliness washed over him, one he hadn’t let himself feel in quite some time as he thought of his parents, thought of the last time he’d actually seen them.

The distance, the lack of a loving relationship between him and his father certainly hadn’t made it any easier when the time had come to throw dirt on his coffin. Tony had to imagine it was a thousand times worse when you were losing someone that actually spent time with you, held you when you were scared, someone that made you feel safe, and loved.

The idea of putting Steve through something like that, just because he enjoyed taking care of him? It seemed the height of selfishness.

The Avengers were consenting adults, and none of them had been exactly living the free and easy life before coming together. Out of all of them, Tony himself probably had the most years of risk free living under his belt, and he’d been taken and held for ransom at least a couple times before turning
There was Sam, of course, but even he’d been to war, knew the risks associated with his involvement. Tony had to think that if their roles were reversed, Sam would be the better man—he’d walk away from all of this, and dedicate himself to being a good father.

Tony sighed, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before blasting off. It wasn’t a fair comparison and he knew it. Sam had the luxury of being a normal person. He was a Stark, and he’d still be a Stark even if he gave up being Iron Man.

“Suck it up,” Tony told himself, exhaling sharply. He switched on his comms, and tried to turn off the rest of his brain. “Cap, I’m enroute. What we got?”

There was a slight delay before he heard, “Good question. They look sort of like robotic spiders. I was thinking we blow them up.”

"Sounds like a solid plan." Despite everything, Tony grinned as he picked up the pace. "Save some for me!"

Chapter 16

“Wake up.”

Tony attempted to burrow, wanting nothing more than to escape the voice, escape the intrusion. It had to be early—way too early to be dealing with people, at the very least—and usually if you played dumb (or dead) these things worked themselves out.

A hand gripped his shoulder, shaking violently, and yeah, not cool. Waves of nausea washed through him, and even though his eyes were closed the room still felt like it was spinning. Hm. Thoughts slipped along with consciousness, but he’d surfaced enough to realize he wasn’t dealing with a hangover, he was just straight up still drunk. Definitely too early for human interaction then.

“Fuck. Off.”

“Tony.”

And there went the blanket, ripped away with enough force to send him actually tumbling from the bed. He had just enough time to fumble for the trashcan, not that it did him any good. He puked on the floor next to it, and once he was no longer retching he had to laugh, because close but no cigar.

“S’a good, ah, metaphor. For life. Mine.” He swiped at his mouth, grimacing. “Is it a metaphor? I dunno. There’s some sort of message in there, though.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“Or, you could just sum it up like that, I guess.” Tony sighed, tipped his head back, resting it against the side of the bed. “Hi, dad.”

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be at school.”

Tony tried not to show any sign of reacting, but if the clock was accurate (and he had no reason to think otherwise) he’d only gotten two hours of sleep after a solid day of drinking. He was, understandably, worn a little thin.

Tony could almost hear the lecture his mother would receive later for coddling him. “Mom wanted
me home for a visit.”

The longer he sat there staring up at his father, the more convinced Tony became that he’d fallen back asleep and had started dreaming. Howard was standing with his back to the window, and light was pouring in around him, making him seem larger than life while simultaneously keeping his face in shadows. Little dust motes swarmed distractingly in the air around him, adding to the surreality.

“What, nothing?” he said after the silence became too uncomfortable. “You have no idea why she wanted me home, do you?”

“How your mother doesn’t bother me with her little flights of fancy.”

Tony spat in the trashcan, awake enough now that the smell of the vomit was getting to him. He’d need to clean it up before he could pass out again, would need a shower to wash away the cold, dried sweat on his skin.

Carefully, he used the bed to help himself to his feet, hating the way the room spun from the movement. “It’s my birthday.”

His father sighed, and Tony could feel it, right down in his bones. It wasn’t the sigh of a man feeling shame over forgetting his only child’s birthday. It was the sort of sigh that made Tony feel like he owed his dad an apology for being born in the first place.

Somehow, he managed to keep his voice from breaking when he offered a half hearted, “Well, I guess we can’t all be born on the Fourth of July.”

Howard ignored the dig, which was probably for the best. “You’re turning sixteen?”

Tony pressed his lips together. Now that he’d stood up, he could see his father’s eyes better. As a result, he could tell Howard knew full well how old he was actually turning. Pretending not to know seemed kind of petty from where Tony was standing. Like he’d get all high and mighty if his own father actually remembered how old he was?

Not likely. He got the message, loud and clear.

He.

Was.

Not.

Important.

Swallowing around his urge to scream in his father’s face, Tony quietly corrected him. “Fourteen, sir.”

“Time to grow up, Tony,” Howard suggested. He pointed to the floor, then gave him a little shove, so that he fell back onto the bed, the room spinning violently around him. “Clean up your mess. I don’t ever want to see you in such a state under this roof again. Do you understand me?”

Tony wrapped his arms around himself, shivering through the nausea. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t let your mother see you like this.”

Which was funny, really, considering Howard’s love of the bottle. Tony figured after seeing his dad ‘like this’ that he’d be a laugh by comparison. Sure, he was puking on the floor, but he wasn’t
throwing things, or threatening anybody. He was an adorable drunk according to his classmates. Very friendly. Affectionate. More likely to curl up in your lap than try to hit you.

Howard was almost out of the room when Tony said, “I love you, dad,” because he was some sort of masochist, apparently. Howard paused long enough for Tony to understand that he’d heard the words, then continued on his way.

Tony cleaned up his mess. He drank some water. He brushed his teeth, avoiding looking in the mirror. He showered. He walked back to his room, stared at his bed, and suddenly the thought of sleeping seemed terrifying.

Quiet, as quietly as possible, he walked through the empty house, down and down, until he found the man he was looking for. Jarvis glanced up from his newspaper, a smile transforming his serious features.

“Happy Birthday,” Jarvis said, and just like that, Tony was crying.

"I wish you were my father," he blurted, hardly able to see through his tears. Jarvis was right there, comforting and concerned, but there was still a rigidity to the embrace.

"A father-son relationship is difficult," Jarvis said cautiously. His hand was warm where it stroked Tony's hair. "In time, you might feel differently."

Tony wondered how much time would need to pass before that was true. He also wondered if Jarvis had answered that way out of respect for his employer, or because it was kinder than just outright telling Tony he didn't want to be his father. Maybe it was both.

Anger welled up inside him, short lived but bitter. Why did people even have kids if they weren't going to love them? His father could have dumped him at an orphanage, or done an exchange for a blond haired, blue eyed boy, and named him Steve. Maybe then he'd have actually had a shot at some happiness in his stupid life.

“I'll never… never have kids,” he stammered, pushing aside his tears and stepping out of the now awkward embrace.

“You might find your opinion on that matter changes with time as well.”

Tony shook his head. Jarvis didn’t understand. “Doesn’t matter if I want them. It’s too late,” he said, feeling calmer. “I’m already too messed up.”

He saw sadness in Jarvis’s eyes at this remark. Tony watched his mouth open, dreading what might be said on this subject, but could only blink in confusion at the words and noises that came tumbling out from Jarvis’s opened mouth.

“Sir, wake up.”

Sickness washed over him again, the world shifting before his eyes, and as if from a great distance he heard some sort of alarm bleating.

“Wake. Up.”

Tony blinked, Jarvis’s face swimming before his eyes, everything shifting, and a wall of pain hitting him. He groaned, squeezed his eyes shut, trying to pick something out of the cacophony buzzing in his ears.
"Shut off the comms," he ordered, opening his eyes again. And, excellent, the absence of shouting voices was wonderful. “How long was I out?”

“One minute and thirty-six seconds, sir.” JARVIS sounded relieved. “I've notified the Captain of your status. He requests you turn the comms back on.”

"Gimme a minute. How 'bout visuals instead."

"Bringing displays back on line now."

Tony squinted and fought off the urge to puke as light poured in. Definitely a concussion. Oh, cool, and things were on fire around him. Great. The ground was scattered with twisted shards of metal, some of them twitching suspiciously as he stumbled in a circle and got his bearings.

“Sir, the Captain is eager to speak with you.”

"Tell Steve I'm fine," Tony snapped, running down the armor's damage report.

"Iron Man!"

Tony prepared to unleash a tirade on JARVIS for opening the channel, except it wasn't Steve's voice. It was James, which...

Another wave of nausea washed over him, so he opened the faceplate in order to puke, ignoring James's frantic voice for a moment. That helped clear his head a bit, at least.

Right. James was Captain America now, because Steve was in diapers. No wonder JARVIS overrode his order. Probably worried about brain damage.

"J, what's the status at the Tower?"

"The Tower is fine," James—Captain America—snapped. "What the hell just happened?"

Tony grimaced, because he was a little sketchy on that part. JARVIS helpfully scrolled diagnostic readings across the display.

“Spiders go boom,” he said, forcing a nonchalance he didn't feel. "All signs point to an EMP blast. Nice touch. Glad I built in those redundancies."

Tony spotted another wave of spiders picking through the rubble nearby, and got his shiny metal ass off of the ground. His new vantage point gave him a nice view of the crater he'd left behind when crashing.

"Copy that, Iron Man. Any idea on the blast radius?"

With a resigned sigh, he opened all channels on the comms, and targeted the legs of the things below, disabling but not destroying the mechanical spiders.

"Uh, not sure," he answered, trying to cope with the dizziness. "Enough to bring me back down to earth?"

Tony pulled in and reviewed the readings, feeling a little better once he learned that everyone else seemed to be holding their own. Apparently he was the only one injured, which was fine by him. He had a lot of practice by this point.

The Hulk was the closest, apparently having been on his way to intercept. He was currently having a
blast (ha!) smashing the spiders, making short work of them, which in turn allowed Tony to get some readings.

"Okay, looks like the effect registers approximately 543 meters straight up," he said with a frown. "Obviously someone was thinking of me. Sweet, really."

"Right, hang back, provide support," Captain America ordered.

Tony did as instructed, began picking things off from a distance, his head and side throbbing.

"Hey, J, make a note to modify Sam's wings? Would've been bad if he was hit by one of those blasts."

"Noted, sir."

"Thanks," Tony struggled to take a deep breath and grimaced. "The ribs—break or just bruised?"

JARVIS helpfully showed him he'd cracked a rib; just a hairline, but a fracture nonetheless. It was going to be a bitch carrying Steve.

And just like that, he couldn't breathe any longer, everything just seized up, the armor momentarily jerking in the air as he sought to regain his emotional balance.

Maybe it was the concussion, or the lingering sensation of being emotionally eviscerated by his father, but everything from the last month came crashing down around him, thoughts cascading until he was left with the fundamentals of the problem they’d all been dealing with.


Tony let his thoughts settle, numbed, knowing he was right. It left him raw, and confused as to how he could have missed it. Then again, he’d missed a lot—misunderstood a lot—because of his relationship with his father.

He could lie to himself, make excuses, but the truth was, for whatever reason, his father had resented him instead of loving him, which was shitty, but then a lot of things were shitty. There was no point in crying about it for the rest of his life. It was a disservice to himself and the people he cared about to continue filtering everything through Howard Stark’s idea of what his son was, or what he should be.

Jarvis might not have been on the money about the money about everything, but he’d gotten part of it right. He could be a good father, Tony knew that now. He hadn't even been at it a month and he was already better than either of his parents had been. Sure, that wasn't setting the bar particularly high, but still. It was something. Something to consider, maybe.

Raising Steve, though. That was different. He’d agreed to stop pretending, which meant he needed to tell Steve how he was feeling, and be brave, and just… accept the truth. As much as it gutted him, left him torn right down the middle with what if’s and could have beens.

And if Steve wanted to stay a child even after Tony’s confession, if a fresh start at life was the only way he could be happy, Tony could do that with him. But he owed him the truth first. He needed to know he’d tried everything to get their friend back.

"JARVIS. Can you open a channel to Steve?"

"Shall I monitor the comms for you in the meantime?"
"Yeah, thanks."

"Everything's quiet here," Sam announced as soon as the connection was established.

"Good. Can... I need to say some things to Steve. I'm kind of hoping I can trust you to, ah, not repeat them."

Sam's expression darkened, but that was okay. It meant he was taking this seriously. "I'm putting him in front of the camera, then consider me officially not here."

"Thanks." A moment later, Tony felt warmth and affection wash through him, just the sight of Steve's face enough to push everything else aside for a moment. He was willing to bet his father never once had that reaction when seeing him. "Hey, cupcake. How you doing?"

"On!" Steve squeaked, then babbled his displeasure, apparently taking note of Tony's compromised state. He didn't think there was any blood visible anywhere, but he honestly had no idea. He had a feeling he looked wrecked either way.

"I know. I'll be okay, it's just a concussion," he swore, smiling despite himself. "Steve. Steve, baby, I'm sorry."

Tony struggled with his mouth, momentarily distracting himself with the cleanup taking place below as he let his emotions settle.

"I'm sorry about a lot of things. I'm sorry I didn't have this conversation last week, or the week before, because I'm getting this awful 'it's too late' feeling, and I don't want it to be too late. I need you to come back. You, Steve, the real you."

The blue eyes watching him looked scared, wary, and Tony wondered if Steve knew what was coming.

"Not just for the Captain America stuff," Tony said. "But because you're my friend, and I'm selfish. I love you, Steve Rogers. There's... There are things, about me, and, ah, my childhood. Stuff Howard did, or said, that, um, left me at a disadvantage, in a lot of ways. Especially where you're concerned. Things that you don't know, but maybe you figured some of it out already, I don't know."

This had been hard enough to do with James, when it was just the two of them. Tony tried to forget Sam was in the room, which was easier said than done. But, really, what did it matter anyway, in the grand scheme of things? Sam was the missing piece of the puzzle, had more or less come right out and told him what was going on without explicitly telling him.

The answer had been there the whole time, staring him in the face, but as he'd told Jarvis all those years ago, he was messed up. Too twisted around and broken down by Howard Stark to have anything but blinders on when it came to love and Steve Rogers.

Tony's memory was good, so once he removed his own prejudices about himself from the equation, it was all right there, waiting for him.

Loki had singled him out when speaking to them all, explaining the nature of Steve's emotional wound. Then, when he'd questioned Thor, the Asgardian had all but given him the answer, if he hadn't been too stubborn to even consider the possibility.

After all, he and James were the only ones Steve had remembered, and Loki specifically spoke to Thor about the "bonds of love" being the reason why. He'd had no problem understanding why James was worth remembering, but immediately channeled his inner Howard and dismissed himself
as a fluke.

Sam, shaking his head, sad little smile on his face.

“Not sure how I’m supposed to compete with Tony Stark.”

Sam again, telling him what he thought would be a surefire way of getting Steve to return.

"He’ll listen to you. It might not always seem like it from where you’re standing, but he listens to you more than anyone else."

Tony would have laughed if it all wasn’t so heartbreaking.

“Hey, for a smart guy, I’m pretty stupid when it comes to feelings. Steve, please believe me when I say I didn’t know. That you…” Tony struggled, couldn’t help himself, but managed to spit it out eventually. “That you’re in love with me.”

Shit. He didn’t want to cry for this, he wanted to be brave.

“Man, this sucks,” Tony whimpered. “I know all about loving someone you can’t have, and that’s the last… last thing… I would… Steve.”

He’d expected screaming, or wailing, but the big blue eyes watching him looked more shocked than anything, the chubby little features frozen.

“I should have figured it out, huh?” Tony tried for a smile, didn’t quite make it there. “Maybe you even tried to tell me, and I didn’t understand. So, I’m sorry. I wish I could, ah, just take you back in time and show you how it was, so you’d understand why I am the way I am. Not, um, not as an excuse, just. I mean, fuck, Steve, how long have I been hurting you?”

"On," Steve moaned, looking distressed, the tears finally making an appearance.

“I love you. I can’t give you what you need, but it’s still love, Steve, so much love. The idea of never… never hearing your voice again?"

Steve was sobbing now, and Tony squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m not just asking for me, but for James—for Bucky—because he loves you, too. So… so I’ll have taken you away from him.”

Tony exhaled shakily as Steve wailed. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. "I can't turn off my feelings. Believe me, I've been trying my whole life. The guilt will eat away at everything. I'll always blame myself, it's just who I am."

Chubby little hands shook in the air as Steve waved his arms in agitation, his lower lip sticking out, brows drawn together, eyes bright with tears.

"So, moment of truth, my little cupcake; I've loved every minute of taking care of you, but you're not my son. And pretending otherwise isn't fair to anyone, least of all you. Please, Steve, please come back. I miss you so fucking much."

Tony opened his mouth, prepared to continue begging, but the feed cut out, leaving him looking at the battlefield again.

“What the hell!”

“Sorry, sir, but…”
With a growl of frustration, Tony took note of the large, angry looking metal spider beginning to make its way up the side of the building he was hovering above. A dozen more appeared, the backs opening up, and something popping out.

He swallowed, tried to get his head back in the game.

"Oh, great, they're bigger now." And he sounded like he’d been crying. Perfect. Tony momentarily cut all channels, screamed some profanities at himself, then switched back on, channeling his inner press circuit diva. "Hey, those look like mounted cannons."

"No duh," Hawkeye answered. Tony watched one of the cannons swivel his direction. Make that all the cannons. "Uh, I think they're targeting you, by the way."

"Of course. I'm very popular with mechanical spiders."

Tony waited for them to fire, analyzing the blast even as he evaded, not wanting to be hit with anything. He’d had quite enough of crashing for the day. "Okay, looks like an EMP gun," he said. "There seems to be a theme."

"Are you out of range?" Captain America asked, "I don't want to smash these and knock you out of the sky again."

"Aww, you say the sweetest things, my fearless leader. Go for it. I'll evade."

Tony watched as the team began wiping out the latest spider iterations. "J, I think want a pet spider. I'm gonna hack into these mechanical beasts, keep up suppressive fire for me while I play."

Which was actually trickier than he'd expected. Not impossible, or even terribly difficult, just trickier than expected. “Alrighty, shall we,” he began, before realizing his mistake. If he hadn’t been emotionally eviscerated and concussed he probably wouldn’t have tripped the failsafe, but it was too late now.

“Sir, I’m detecting a significant energy spike within the creatures."

“Heads up, Avengers, these spiders are about to go boom,” Tony shouted over the comms, even as he sped away. “Don’t know what the...”

The explosion drowned him out, shockwave sending him tumbling through the air like a rag doll. He braced for impact, but it must have been his lucky day.

“Boom, indeed,” Thor remarked, catching Tony around the waist.

“Not my finest moment,” he agreed, wincing as they touched down, the impact making his side scream in protest.

Hawkeye landed beside them with gusto, dropkicking a chunk of spider in the process, and scratched his head. “Well, that’s one way to do it, I guess."

Thor swung his hammer back and forth in the air, grinning happily. “Are there other mechanical arachnids to slay?"

Tony was already reviewing incoming data, but it looked quiet. Maybe too quiet? At the moment he wasn’t exactly confident in his ability to think clearly. The world was spinning again, and he was so emotionally on edge that he felt about two seconds away from bursting into tears.
“Sir,” JARVIS interrupted, “Since the blast, I have been unable to reestablish a connection with the Tower.”

As JARVIS spoke, Tony spotted Captain America and Black Widow approaching, Hulk hot on their heels.

“What do you mean?” Tony asked, panic washing over him. “With Falcon, or…”

“I’m unable to connect with the Tower in any regard,” JARVIS clarified, sounding irritated. “The EMP released during the last explosion has caused a great deal of damage within the area, perhaps compromising the Tower’s communications grid, or the armor. Disturbingly enough, my last reading indicated a localized buildup in energy.”

“Localized in the Tower?”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS answered as James came skidding to a halt beside him, shield slung over his shoulders.

“What’s localized in the Tower?”

“JARVIS spotted a build up of energy right before losing contact with the Tower,” Tony answered in a rush, “I’m heading back.”

Captain America grabbed his arm. “Not alone, you’re not!”

Tony thought he was going to have to argue for James to stay behind, but apparently wearing the suit gave you an extra special sense of responsibility. He could see how much James wanted to go with him, but instead he said, “Hawkeye, you’re with Iron Man.”

“Please keep in mind I’m not a super soldier,” Hawkeye requested, snapping off a salute before presenting himself for carrying. “If you drop me, Widow will kill you.”

Tony fought the urge to flip up the faceplate, kiss James senseless. He got the sense that James felt the same way, because he shook his head, and said, “Go. Let us know immediately if you need backup.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony answered, adjusting his grip and taking off.

All the way home, all he could think was, “Please be okay.”

Chapter 17

“Well, it’s still there,” Clint said as soon as they spotted their home, “that’s a good sign, at least.”

Not good enough as far as Tony was concerned. “J, anything?”

“Scans show no signs of damage,” JARVIS reported, and a tiny bit of the tension coiled within his belly lessened. “Reports indicate the Tower was evacuated approximately eight minutes ago, which coincides with the buildup of power I detected.”

“That’s gotta be a good sign,” Clint pointed out.

“Evacuations are a good sign? Remind me; what’s a bad sign again?”

“How about fire, and explosions, and people screaming and running in circles?”
“Yeah, fair enough, that’d be a pretty bad sign.”

Clint gave the best approximation of a shrug that he could manage with the way Tony was holding him. “Whatever happened, everyone was able to get out and nothing came after them.”

“I’m digging this newfound optimism,” Tony answered, just for something to say, something to keep his mind off of worrying. Steve was in there somewhere, needed his help, and Tony could feel every last bit of himself vibrating with a barely contained sense of urgency.

“It’s a thing I’m trying.”

“Coming in high,” Tony announced, adjusting his grip on a whooping Clint. For someone supposedly worried about being dropped, he seemed to be having fun. Maybe it was part of that thing he was trying. "Steve is the first priority."

"Roger that," Clint answered. "You can let go, I'll head in my way."

Clint kicked off of the armor, showing off a bit as he flipped down onto the roof, but in the blink of an eye he was in, and on his way. Tony continued running scans, reassured by the lack of anything interesting he encountered, right up until he was inside the Tower.

Everything was dark, lit only by the red backup bulbs scattered throughout, a clear sign they were running on emergency power. “Why did I pick red?” Tony asked himself.

“I believe sir wished for that, and I quote, cheesy movie effect,” JARVIS answered.

“Well, it certainly has that.”

“No sign of Sam or Baby Rogers in the safe room,” Clint reported over the comms. “What’s with the creepy red lights, man?”

“Whatever happened kicked things into lockdown,” Tony answered, changing direction. “I need to head to control, get things up and running again. Was… what did it look like in there?”

“Like someone had a tantrum,” Clint answered. “Chairs and a table knocked over, but nothing actually broken, no signs of, ah, anyone having been injured.”

Tony exhaled shakily, nodding to himself. He wanted to fly through the entire place, see if he could pick up a lead on them, but the smartest course of action was to get JARVIS up and running again. The AI would be able to pinpoint Steve and Sam without issue. That was, of course, assuming they were still in the Tower.

“Protocol states they head to the other safe room.”

“On it,” Clint said. “Power cycle the Tower already. This is freaky.”

Tony kept his eyes peeled for any signs of enemy infiltration, but all was quiet, right up until he reached his destination. “Sir, I’m picking up activity on the other side of the door,” his AI informed him. “I’m unable to determine the number of individuals or their locations within the room.”

“Shit. I guess when I shielded it from scans I should have left myself a keyhole or something for snooping. J?”

"Noted."

"Thanks, buddy."
Tony prepared to blast the door off the hinges, but caught himself at the last minute. He wasn’t the only one with permission to enter the area. Pepper could be inside with Parker being proactive for all he knew. Tony gave himself a count of three, then cautiously pushed the door open.

And then everything seemed to slow down, just ground to a halt as Sam spun around, ready to face down whatever was coming through the door, only to realize it was Tony.

“Great, someone who knows what they’re doing,” he laughed, but Tony hardly heard him, because Captain America was standing with his back to the door, hunched over and messing with the control panel.

In slow motion, he watched as the figure rose to his full height, and turned, and Tony couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think, he couldn’t do anything but open the faceplate and croak, “Steve?”

As he watched, the helmet was torn off, and tossed aside, and there was a shock of blond (not brown, not James) hair sticking up all crazy. Steve was wearing the most vulnerable expression he’d ever seen (love and fear and hope) but then his eyes lit up, everything else giving way to absolute joy.

“Tony!”

Even if he’d had all the time in the world, Tony doubted he would have been able to carefully process and catalog everything he was feeling in that moment. Some aspects stood out, and stuck with him, though. It reminded him of holding onto Rhodey’s hand as he stepped back onto American soil for the first time since Afghanistan. Terrifying, confusing happiness and relief, warring with a raw exposed sensation. But it was also eerily reminiscent of later that same day, when he’d had JARVIS pull up a visual representation of what had been done to his body. Crippling loneliness, and loss and devastation. The understanding that he had been forever changed. That coming home meant nothing.

Tony could have spun his emotional wheels for days or weeks or years, but then he had an armful of Captain America—of Steve Rogers—and he could only laugh, and cry, and hold on.

“Steve,” he shouted again, because it seemed to sum things up. “Hang on,” he begged, smacking against Steve’s back and shoving at his shoulders.

As soon as he had a little room, Tony opened the suit, and stepped free. It was terrifying, even though it should have been the easiest thing in the world. More than most, Steve understood how vulnerable, how very human and fragile he was. Him and his foolish, flawed heart.

Steve reached a shaking hand for him, let it settle against Tony’s chest, fingers splayed over the arc reactor, needing permission. “Careful, I cracked a rib,” he said, before stepping into Steve’s arms.

It was like the completion of a circuit.

Steve curled around him, strong arms encircling Tony’s smaller frame, holding tight, but not enough to cause any discomfort. He could feel the slight trembling in Steve’s body, wasn’t particularly surprised, because he was shaking, too.

“Hey,” Steve said softly, pressing his face against Tony’s neck. He could feel the dampness of Steve’s tears against his skin, and stupidly Tony had the urge to pick him up, bounce him on his hip and tell him everything was going to be okay.

“You’re taller than me again,” he joked, because that was safer.
Steve laughed, but only because he was expected to. And so what if Tony was crying too? He’d earned his tears. He’d also earned the right to comfort, and so Tony stroked his hands up and down Steve’s back, just as he’d have done for the smaller Steve.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, holding on tight despite the pain.

Steve made a scared little noise at this, but the trembling stopped. He sighed, and some of the tension eased out of him. Tony tightened his own grip, stroked Steve’s hair, and allowed himself to appreciate the familiarity of having a grown Steve Rogers in his arms.

It was still surreal, any way you sliced it. Steve smelled different, but there lingered a faint trace of the baby shampoo he and James had used the night before during bathtime. Part of him mourned, wished desperately for the little boy, even as the rest of him rejoiced at having the man—his friend—back.

“Miss me?” Steve asked, and Tony wanted to shake him, or hit him, because it was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard.

Except.

Except, he cupped Steve’s face, and looked, really looked, and it was all there in Steve’s eyes. Tony could see it now, everything he’d made himself ignore, or had reinterpreted as something else over the years they’d known each other. Everything he was feeling was right there, too. Happiness and loss at war with each other.

Tony kissed him, hands on either side of Steve’s face so that he couldn’t go anywhere, pulled him in close, and brought their mouths together. It wasn’t like kissing James. It wasn’t like kissing anyone he’d ever kissed before. Steve’s lips moved against his own, soft, warm. It was a tender kiss, reverent, and gentle and full of love, but there was no heat. No passion. Only comfort, and happiness, and sorrow.

When they pulled apart, Steve was smiling through his tears, and laughing. “Okay, so that’s a yes,” he managed, voice breaking halfway through. He kept his forehead pressed against Tony’s, hands wrapped around Tony’s wrists.

“Yes,” Tony answered, smiling so hard his face hurt. “Steve,” he whispered, and it was strange watching how Steve’s expression softened, just from the way Tony said his name. “Steve,” he said again. “Cupcake. I am so unbelievably happy to see you.”

Steve closed his eyes for a moment, but he was still smiling, wide and wild. When he opened them again, Tony just laughed because he could see him. See that beautiful little boy that he’d come to love so fiercely. Unable to help himself, Tony kissed his forehead, pulled him into another hug.

“We lost contact,” Tony said, sighing. “I thought for sure HYDRA... Damn. I was so worried about you, baby.”

It was strange, seeing the way Steve’s mouth quirked, as he ducked his chin, and his cheeks flushed. Tony almost expected to hear him whine, “Mom, you’re embarrassing me.”

The two of them stood there, hands on each other’s shoulders, just staring into each other’s eyes. Tony’s heart rate slowly ticked back down to the normal range. Even though it felt like grief had ripped a hole right through the center of him, he was simultaneously so happy that he could ignore it, push it aside. That could be for later, for him and James to deal with together. For now, he was fearless and content, and so very relieved.
“I was so scared I’d never see you again,” Tony managed, swallowing past the lump in his throat.

Steve’s mouth trembled a bit. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Tony insisted, smoothing out Steve’s hair for him.

Someone cleared their throat. “Hey, guys?”

They each gave a guilty start, and turned to find Sam standing there, arms folded across his chest, grinning at them awkwardly. “Sorry to break up the reunion, but should we maybe turn the building back on?”

Right. Tony watched Steve brush aside his tears and straighten up. He gave a little nod, and Tony opened a channel. "Hawkeye? Found them! Looks like the readings JARVIS picked up was from our not so little Steve making a grand entrance."

Tony kept his hand on Steve’s shoulder, thumb brushing against his neck, as if breaking contact might somehow result in Steve disappearing again. Kept his eyes on him, too, watching the gratitude and joy wash across his features as Clint burst onto the channel to reply. Steve’s hearing was good enough for him to pick up Clint’s exuberant voice even without the aid of an earpiece.

"Caps back? He’s him again?"

"Yup," Tony answered, squeezing Steve’s shoulder. “I’m looking at him right now.” Tony winced as Clint shouted his approval, and Steve shook with laughter. “I should have things back up and running in a couple minutes.”

“Y ou gonna tell the other Cap, or should I?”

“If someone’ll hand over an earpiece, I could tell him myself,” Steve said, mouth quirked up in a wry smile.

Tony tugged his free, handed it over. “You got it, boss.”

It was difficult, blocking everything out, trying to focus on bringing JARVIS’s systems back online. Behind him Steve made the call, his voice cracking as he said, “Hey, Bucky.”

It shouldn’t matter that his hands were shaking, and his mind was of the opinion he should go hide somewhere for a while. Staring at a wall, trying desperately not to feel sounded like a pretty good way to spend the next few days.

The hand that settled onto his shoulder and gave a little squeeze wasn’t Steve’s. Tony looked up and was momentarily taken aback by the look on Sam’s face. There was gratitude, and understanding. Sympathy. Maybe some fear, and hope. Tony’s wasn’t the only life that had been turned upside down by Steve’s return.

“Thank you,” he mouthed.

Tony could only nod, and look away, and get the job done. He fixed things, it was what he did, and even if it took a while, he’d find a way to repair the damage Steve’s transformation had wrought. He’d be stronger for it, too; him and James. Had a feeling Steve would be stronger as well.

Sam kept his hand right where it was, all through hearing one side of a tear-choked conversation, and Tony wondered if maybe now he could talk Sam into sticking around. Staying in the Tower with them.
“Wake up for daddy,” Tony said softly, taking comfort in the slight hum that accompanied JARVIS coming back online.

“Good evening, sir. Sorry for the interruption.”

Despite himself, Tony smiled, let Sam pull him to his feet, huffing with discomfort. “We back in business?”

“Indeed. I’ve successfully re-established communications with the outside world. Diagnostics indicate no permanent damage from the energy released during the Captain’s return to adulthood.”

“Glad to hear it, JARVIS,” Steve said. “Other than the broken rib, anything I need to know?”

“Sir is concussed, but otherwise unharmed.”

“Really? You’re back, what, ten minutes and you’re already trying to steal my mom routine?”

Steve smiled at that, but there was a bit of a wobble to it. Tony didn’t think, just reached out and smoothed a hand over Steve’s hair, then down across his cheek, comforting him on autopilot. He was going to have to watch that. Steve wasn’t his anymore.

Only, Steve grabbed his hand before he could pull it away, held it against his cheek, and leaned into the touch. For the space of a heartbeat, Tony was back in a memory, the taste of scotch on his lips and Steve pressed alongside him making him brave (it’s now or never, Stark), and so he had reached for Steve (fingertips brushing against the warmth of his cheek, and he’s never wanted to kiss someone so badly in his life) hoping and actually believing that what he felt wasn’t one-sided. Steve had flinched, and brushed him aside so carefully, but he might as well have slid a blade between Tony’s ribs (there’s your answer, and what did you expect anyway, you pathetic...) for how much it hurt.

It felt like a lifetime had passed between that moment and this, and Tony was willing to bet everything he owned that Steve knew, that Tony wasn’t the only one suddenly stranded in that moment, feeling as if the entire future hung in the balance.

A lifetime of love, and pain, and loss, and discovery, and it felt like maybe they’d finally gotten it right. Tony brushed his thumb against the curve of Steve’s cheekbone, watched his eyelashes flutter as he pressed into the contact, as he held Tony’s hand against the side of his face, and opened his eyes.

Steve swallowed, and licked his lips. “You don’t…”

But whatever he was going to say was cut off by the arrival of Hawkeye. And, sure, he’d have liked some more quiet time, but in a lot of ways, this was better. Tony let go, stepped aside, heart hammering away as he and Sam stood shoulder to shoulder and watched Clint all but tackle Steve with a bear hug, and plant a big wet one on him.

Less than twenty minutes later, they were all back upstairs together, and it was déjà vu all over again, as Steve found himself mobbed by Avengers eager to welcome him back.

“Okay, that actually hurts,” Steve groaned, slapping Thor on the back as he was lifted off the ground, hugged fiercely, and spun in a circle.

“My heart swells with joy at the sight of you,” Thor announced, and several of them groaned.

“Phrasing,” Clint muttered, but Steve just laughed, and accepted the sentiment with a happy,
“Thanks, Thor.”

Steve hardly had time to recover before James had a hold of him, and then everyone had to process the strange that was watching two Captain America’s hug as if their lives depended on it. Tony hung back, biting the inside of his cheek as James grabbed hold of Steve, and kissed him, much as Tony had done.

“This looks good on you,” Steve said, and Tony had to close his eyes at the soft, vulnerable noise James made.

“Stevie,” he managed after a moment, and when Tony opened his eyes again, he saw Steve with his own eyes squeezed shut tight, holding onto James as if scared someone might try to split them up again. The two of them rocked back and forth together, while James croaked, “You scared the hell outta me, you punk.”

“You okay?”

Tony jumped, then relaxed, let himself lean against Bruce. “Mm hm. Just a head splitting concussion, and a broken rib.”

A tremor ran through him, subsiding at the light touch of Bruce’s hand between his shoulder blades. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Only answer I got at the moment.”

For reasons he would have had trouble explaining, Tony had yet to make eye contact with James. There was an awful, twisted feeling working through him, one that wouldn’t be real until that happened, and so he was trying to put it off as long as possible.

“I’m sorry,” Steve was saying, an arm still hooked around James even as he hugged Natasha.

“You got nothing to be sorry about,” James insisted, kissing Steve’s cheek this time, his eyes bright and wet with tears.

Steve ducked his head, and it broke Tony’s heart a little bit. How long had he been wearing his blinders, convincing himself that somehow Steve had managed to just shake off the war, the way his world had changed, all of the people and places and the life he had lost? He knew all about that loneliness, about the distance, and the terrible, insidious ways your own heart tore you to pieces. More than anyone, he should have been able to recognize it in his friend.

Now, it was impossible to ignore, to forget. He thought of himself, of Steve a warm, comforting weight against his chest. Closed his eyes for a moment and tried to summon the feeling of Steve there, safe in his arms, before opening his eyes again.

“He’s right, Cap. We’re your family,” he got out, having to pause to clear his throat. “We’ll always take care of you, because we love you.”

Steve’s composure cracked a little at this, but he got it back under control. “I love you, too,” he said, holding Tony’s gaze, sadness and joy in his eyes. “All of you. Tony’s right. You’re my family, and you… Well. I guess what I’m trying to say is, thank you.”

Thor clapped Steve on the shoulder. “Would you not do the same for us, brother?”

“Uh, speaking as someone who actually changed Steve’s diapers,” Tony interrupted, happy to see Steve let himself laugh, muttering, “I’m never going to live this down, am I?” to James. “I just want
“Okay, I gotta know. How much do you remember?” Clint asked, tossing an unopened beer to Thor before flopping down on the couch. Nat smacked him, while James ruffled Steve’s hair affectionately. “What? I’m not trying to be nosy, s’just there’s money riding on it.”

Sam laughed, then held his hands up. “Whoa, hey. Natasha started the betting pool, don’t look at me.”

“What exactly did we bet on?” Tony asked, folding his arms across his chest, then wincing. The cracked rib was a dull ache in his side that he’d simply lumped in with the ache in his heart.

“Your baby to adult translations,” Clint explained, looking at him like he was stupid.

Steve laughed, and shook his head, struggling to get his smile under control. “Ah. Well. It’s… It’s strange. Um,” he looked up, meeting Tony’s eyes before looking back down again. “There are lots of moments that stand out, but some things are fading. Almost like real childhood memories.”

“Fascinating,” Bruce murmured, shifting beside Tony. “We should probably scan him again, you know?”

“Definitely, but later.”

Clint whined. “So, come on, all the crap Tony said you were thinking or saying. Got anything that’d help me win?”

“At first, it was like you were all strangers. Well, everyone but Tony and Bucky.” Steve scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck and shrugged. “It was terrifying, and frustrating. I’m not sure how much I even comprehended, to be honest with you, but through it all…” He smiled, and there went Tony’s chest, aching again. “Through it all, Tony understood what I was trying to say, even when I didn’t.”

“Damn it,” Clint groaned, fishing in his pockets, and throwing a wad of bills on the table.

“Seriously? You bet against mom?” Tony joked, not entirely surprised when Sam also forked over some cash. “Go to your room, young man.”

Clint shrugged. “I could have sworn you were making half the shit up.”


“You heard him,” Clint said, leaning over and helping himself to a bit of a refund, ignoring the others chiming in on how much should and could be taken from the pool based on Tony’s confession.

And while the rest of them laughed, and celebrated, Tony looked up, right into James’s eyes, the one place he’d been avoiding so carefully. One look into those conflicted blue depths and there was nothing else to be done, no going back.

Tony thought of the little life they’d built around the three of them, thought of James beside him on the balcony.

“We gotta let him go.”

This time, he couldn’t use the cracked rib as an excuse for being unable to take a deep breath. Tony wanted to run and hide, because this wasn’t the sort of thing that should be allowed to happen in
Before he could panic too much, James was there, had a hand curled possessively around the back of Tony’s neck. “Let Bruce give you something for the pain,” he said softly, his other hand warm against Tony’s side, as if he could heal the break just by his touch. “You’re doing the shallow breathing thing Stevie used to do.”

“I can make it a local,” Bruce chimed in, maybe understanding how terrified Tony was of putting any sort of mind altering substance into his body. That particular slope felt far too slippery at the moment. If he started, he might not be able to stop, and he needed to own these feelings, work through them, not run away. He was sick of running away; the shit always caught up to you. Steve was proof enough of that.

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed.

James kissed his forehead, then let go, went over and pulled Steve into another hug. “Don’t you go anywhere,” he ordered, giving Steve a kiss against his forehead to match Tony’s own.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Captain.”

Tony had to look away at that, stared at the shield currently resting on one of the chairs. Remembered James’s visceral reaction to seeing it waiting for him, of the pain he’d felt over having to tell the man he loved that he needed to try replace the one other irreplaceable person in his life.

But then he was in the elevator, Bruce and James beside him, staring out across the room, sharing a smile with Steve before the doors closed, and left him looking at his own reflection again. Thought of his request to JARVIS, to be reminded of the pain, of the sheer stupidity of wanting another life, one he didn’t deserve.

“Hey,” James murmured, and Tony hadn’t even realized he was sobbing until he felt arms around him, pulling him in close. It didn’t matter, though, because as carefully as James held him, he still hurt himself just by the act of crying.

“Ow,” he groaned, because that sure summed it up.

It felt like everything was closing in on him, and he wondered if this would ever stop happening. He’d been doing pretty well before the world decided to throw him for one hell of a loop. He’d built a life with James, and thought he’d known what he did and did not want. Now he knew nothing at all, nothing except…

“Slow down, it’ll be okay,” James insisted, fingers carding through Tony’s hair. “We’ll figure it out together, yeah?”

Tony let himself look, really look. James was as gutted as he was, as devastated and as overjoyed. The ache lessened—not entirely, but enough—because after everything was said and done, he had this. He had James. They had each other. He didn’t have to do any of this alone, not anymore.

“Together,” Tony whispered, marveling. “I told him, you know. That I loved him. Love him. After all of this, all it took was… was for me to ask. Well, beg really. And you know what? I was right, after all. About this being my fault.”

“Hey, Tony,” and that was Bruce, stepping in close, attempting to comfort with his presence, warm and solid and a much better friend than Tony deserved. “You know that’s not true. You have to know that.”
“Antoshka,” James pressed a kiss against his mouth to keep him from protesting, or attempting to contradict Bruce. The elevator slowed to a halt, and Tony allowed himself to be led into the lab, leaning heavily against James even though he didn’t need to. “None of this is about fault. It’s… I think it’s about letting go.”

“Never been particularly good at that,” Tony admitted.

Oh, and he was such a coward. After all was said and done, no matter how many times James proved him wrong, there was still the echo of his father, some ghost in the machine, poisoning everything, trying to convince him that James was going to finally realize what sort of man he’d hooked his wagon to, and change his mind.

Listening to that voice had lost him Steve, but it was difficult to mourn a life he’d never lived when faced with the prospect of ruining the one he had. James was right about letting go, and Tony knew it; letting go was what had led him to realize the source of Steve’s pain. Letting go had given him the opportunity to grow somehow impossibly closer to the man he loved.

James, and what they had together, was everything. Tony needed to let go if that was going to work between them. It also meant he couldn’t keep secrets any more, especially not this one.

“James. I figured it out in the end. He was in love with me,” he blurted, convinced it’d be easier somehow with Bruce right there. That maybe it’d hurt James less to hear it if they weren’t alone when he said it. “He loved me too. Almost… almost this entire time.”

Tony had expected anger, or maybe even doubt over his own feelings and plans regarding this particular revelation. Something other than the sad, understanding look of resignation in James’s eyes.

"Thought he might be," he said softly, his mouth pressed into a thin line. He pushed aside his tears, and exhaled shakily. “Can't really blame him though. All I do is love you. I can appreciate where he’s coming from.”

Tony stared in shock and confusion, allowed Bruce and James to lead him over a chair, sit him down. James held onto his hand, and Tony laughed, and winced at the pain this brought with it.

Once upon a time, Steve Rogers had walked into his workshop with a shellshocked, wounded man beside him. Right from the start, there had been something there between them, something Tony hadn’t wanted to look at too closely at the time. Maybe because looking at James Buchanan Barnes forced him to remember what it meant to come home changed, and broken, and ashamed of how your life had been led. That feeling, that all consuming need to do something, make it better, fix it somehow, all while knowing it’d never be enough. Even when he’d begun falling apart. Even when he’d lost Pepper, had almost lost his own life.

Only James, beautiful, damaged James, had helped him put himself back together again. When James held him, said he loved him, Tony could believe it, could drown out the ghost of Howard Stark. James was a gift, had made him a better man, and Tony didn’t want to know what his life would have been like if things had gone differently.

“I’m glad I didn’t know,” Tony said, hissing as Bruce slid the needle home, the momentary flash of pain washed away by the relief of numbness. He took a deeper breath, exhaled softly.

“Bucky is right. This is about letting go.” Bruce disposed of the needle, then stepped between them, hugging Tony. “Howard was wrong about you. My father was wrong about me too.”
Tony hugged back, smiling despite himself. “Guess that’s why we get along so well.”

“Must be,” Bruce agreed, kissing Tony on the cheek. “I’m going back upstairs,” he said, holding looking Tony in the eyes. “You two should change, and then come celebrate. Steve’s home again because of you.”

“We’ll be right up,” James promised, taking hold of Tony’s hand and waiting for Bruce to leave.

“I am, you know,” Tony said, hating how apologetic he sounded. He hadn’t technically done anything wrong, and yet he still felt guilty. “Glad I didn’t know. In case you were worried about…”

James stepped in close, crowding him, suddenly so in his space that Tony would have fallen off the stool if James hadn’t had a hold on him. But he did, and James didn’t seem inclined to let go anytime soon. He was warm, and tasted of salty tears, smelled like leather, and home, and, “I’m not worried,” he whispered, kissing Tony possessively.

Tony clung to him, hooked a leg around him, pushed against him, wanting James everywhere. The local anesthetic was taking enough of the edge off of things that his side was an ignorable pain, a nice contrast to the tenderness of James’s mouth moving against his own.

James teased his tongue past Tony’s lips, exploring the inside of his mouth as if to make certain nothing had changed. Hands in his hair, cupping his face, sliding up and down his back, as if James couldn’t quite get close enough, couldn’t stay still, needed to keep moving in an attempt to pull Tony closer, to touch all of him. And all the while, he teased and nipped at Tony’s lips, conquered his mouth almost greedily, sighing with a contentment that seemed out of step with the urgency.

“I’m not worried, because you’re mine,” James growled, tugging on Tony’s lower lip. “You love me, and I trust you.”

“I do,” Tony swore, surging forward to kiss James again.

James cracked a smile, surprised him with a little laugh. “We’ll be saying that soon enough.”

Tony nodded, but then he was crying again, unable to help himself. “Letting go is hard,” he admitted, pressing his face against James’s neck. “You might have to help me some days.”

“You can help me, too,” James said, rocking him gently. “We’ll help each other, just like always.”


“I know,” James sighed, holding him tight enough to hurt. “I miss him, too.” They clung to each other, until James sniffed, and began stroking Tony’s hair. “But for right now, let’s celebrate. Let’s go welcome Stevie home.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, sliding off the stool and allowing Bucky to lead him to the elevator. “I can do that.”

Chapter 18

“Hey.”

Tony smiled to himself, not even a little surprised. Really, he’d been waiting there, waiting for Steve to make his way down to the workshop, to walk in, and shuffle awkwardly by the door, uncertain as to whether or not he belonged. Waiting to see if he was welcome.
“Took you long enough.” Tony smiled a nervous little smile, jerked his head in the direction of the empty spot beside him on the couch, and watched Steve Rogers take a seat. “Drink?”

“I’m good,” Steve answered easily, waving away the offer.

He smelled clean and familiar, hair still slightly damp from showering, the uniform exchanged for comfortable clothes. Tony was oddly disappointed that Steve’s t-shirt was plain gray, and not red with a duck on it. He’d have to see if they made those in incredibly broad chest and shoulders sizes. Maybe custom order some.

“Me too,” he said after a moment.

Tony rolled the bottle between his hands before holding it up to the light. The liquid settled into place level with the label, the same as it had been before his friend had disappeared in a flash of magic and left behind a scared little boy in his wake.

Steve was watching him, watching the amber liquid slosh around the bottle as Tony spun it once more.

"The good news is, even though I wanted to, I never took a drink."

Tony thought of the last time he’d held that bottle, and couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh or cry. Losing his mind over the idea of losing Steve. Of raising Steve. Terrified, feeling as if at any moment he might become Howard Stark.

He thought of James, shaking and shattered, looking lost while wrapped up in the red, white, and blue of Captain America’s uniform. Of feeling like the world was ending, as James turned, and walked away.

I wish you hadn't told me. Not today, not now. While I’m standing here, wearing this.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world to climb back inside a bottle, to say fuck it to his life. Tony was almost positive he would have lost everything that mattered to him in the process if he’d done so.

"I'm kinda thinking if I didn't drink through this I'm probably never going to."

Steve held his hand out, accepted the bottle and studied it. “This is the one I, ah, knocked out of your hand. Isn’t it?”

Tony’s smile was forced, the tightness of it matching the tightness in his chest. “Yup.”

Steve nodded, shifted a bit until he was slouched down the same as Tony, their shoulders pressed together. “Feels like that happened a long time ago.”

It had been the night he’d told Steve that he’d found Bucky Barnes, then casually suggested they swing by and pick him up in time for dinner. He’d expected tears and gratitude, but Steve had been shocked and confused that Tony had been keeping the search a secret from him. Seemed blindsided, and almost unsure of whether or not Tony was outright fucking with him. He hadn’t come right out and said it, but Tony could see that Steve actually doubted his motives, and that had hurt.

So, of course, Tony had made some flippant remark, and grabbed the scotch intending to refill his drink, only to have Steve lash out, knocking the bottle aside, his chest heaving. Tony had been so distracted by the wild, raw panic in Steve’s eyes that he’d just ignored the bottle as it rolled across the floor before eventually finding its way under the couch.
When he finally spoke again, it hadn’t been to apologize for hurting Tony’s hand, or potentially murdering half a bottle of exceptional scotch. Steve had sounded like a terrified child in need of reassurance.

What if he hates me, Tony?

James hadn’t, but Tony had hated himself a little that night for how good it had felt to hold Steve Rogers as he cried over what the world had done to his best friend. But that was a long time ago. A lifetime ago.

“It’s almost like it happened to different people.”

“We’re the same,” Steve answered readily.

He sounded so damn sure of himself. Tony had always loved the way Steve could do that, just go all in with his stubbornness, and somehow sound like a shining beacon of hope while doing it. Tony suspected he came off sounding like a mad scientist when he did the same thing.

“Are we?” It wasn’t him being a smart ass, and Steve knew it. Tony shifted around so he could see Steve better, and had that sinking, wonderful, awful feeling again. “I’m not so sure.”

Steve’s smile was tenuous, but genuine. “All the important parts are the same.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Tony said, surprised when Steve laughed, a real smile finally finding its way onto his face.

His surprise only grew when Steve leaned in closer, resting his head against Tony’s shoulder. Some more shifting and repositioning had the bottle back under the couch, and Tony’s arm around Steve, and that was even better.

“How you doing, kiddo?” he asked, pressing a kiss to the top of Steve’s head.

Steve sighed. “Readjusting,” he said eventually, voice vibrating through Tony’s body. ”I almost went to the wrong floor.”

"And then you had to dress yourself and everything," Steve chuckled again. "So, how much do you really remember?"

Steve tensed beside him, but only for a moment. "All the important parts," he said, and Tony’s chest felt tight all over again. "Everything you said to me. Feeling loved and safe."

Tony swallowed around his heart, which was suddenly in his throat where it didn’t belong. "Did it help?"

Steve exhaled, long and shaky, and when he spoke, he sounded almost surprised. "Yeah, actually. It did."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry that you helped me?" Steve asked, shifting upright so he could see Tony again. He was smiling, and it was contagious. "Tony, come on." Steve gave him a little shove. "Some hacks messed up their magic bomb. That wasn't your fault. And guess what? My feelings aren't, either. We just... It wasn't meant to be."

Tony sighed, opened his mouth, feeling the need to argue the point, but Steve just kept going. "I
don't regret loving you, Tony. I'd never change that."

Which was probably a stupid reason to start crying, but it wasn't like he had a choice. Steve pulled him into a hug. Tony tucked up under his chin. Tony wondered how real parents coped with their their kids growing up, if it ever actually felt normal when they were suddenly big enough to do something like reverse the comforting roles on you. He supposed most people had time to gradually get used to it.

"Hey, have I ever bored you to tears with the whole multiverse theory?"

Steve laughed, the vibrations working through Tony's chest, leaving him smiling despite himself. "I don't think so, no."

Tony extracted himself from Steve's embrace, clearing his throat. "Right, long story short, there are alternate universes out there existing alongside our own. Some of them are just like ours, with subtle differences, while others are completely batshit bananacakes crazy."

"Okay," Steve answered hesitantly, his brows drawn together.

"Now, the tiniest thing could cause a divergent timeline, and there's an infinite number of them according to the theory."

Steve looked thoughtful, and maybe even a little disturbed. "So, there's probably a universe where I never got defrosted."

"Right," Tony agreed, clapping his hands together. "Shit, there are probably universes where the serum killed you, or you never met Erskine, or where I died in Afghanistan and..."

"Yeah, I get it, Tony," Steve interrupted, smiling indulgently, even though pain had flashed across his face at the mention of Tony dying. "I just don't get why we're talking about it."

"Ah, well, my little patriotic cupcake, use your imagination. You and I—the you and I that are us, I mean—maybe we weren't meant to be, but that doesn't necessarily hold true for other Tonys and Steves."

Steve's smile grew, until he was shaking his head, watching Tony from the corner of his eye. "So, right now, somewhere else, there's another Tony Stark and another Steve Rogers."

"Guessing lots of them. Statistically speaking, some of them got it right. Maybe they're even sitting on another version of this couch, in love, and together, and happy. Hell, maybe lots of them are. We could be the anomaly, really."

"Huh." Steve seemed equal parts disturbed and comforted. "Maybe another Steve knew the moment when it came. Took a chance."

"Yup. And maybe some other Tony wasn't so hung up on hating himself that he was able to recognize love when it was staring him right in the face."

Steve ducked his head a little. "Is it weird that in this scenario I feel sorry for the other versions of Bucky?"

"No." Tony's heart lurched. "No. Thought about that, too. Guessing there are universes where we don't even know each other. Or where he hates me. Or... or where I made a mess of things? I think about that one a lot, actually. Kind of hard to imagine life without him."
"That's because you're good together," Steve said with a smile. He sighed, stared down at his hands. "You know, I used to have this list I kept in my head, of things I would do differently, or try to change." He sounded amused with himself. "Never know when you might have a chance to time travel."

"C'mon." Tony snorted. "Everyone has that list."

"Sure, Tony, but our lives are so crazy that we might actually have an opportunity to do it someday."

Steve stared into his eyes, then kept right on looking, the silence stretching out between them. It should have been terrifying, but Steve seemed so oddly at peace that Tony couldn't muster the appropriate fear response.

"My list was long for awhile. Probably says something about me that I didn't want to undo the war, or change much of anything, except for you and me and all the ways I got it wrong."

"Hey..."

Steve smiled and placed his hand over Tony's mouth, which was sort of ridiculous. Tony licked his palm, watched Steve’s face scrunch up as he pulled his hand back and wiped it dry on his shirt.

"Real mature."

"Conversations go both ways, Cap, you can't just gag the other party."

Steve rolled his eyes, and Tony wanted to kiss him. Emotionally exhausting or no, it was just so damned good to be able to talk to him again. He hadn't been lying about missing the man.

"I wouldn't have to resort to extreme measures if you'd let me finish a sentence without interrupting to insist I did everything right and you did everything wrong."

Tony's disbelief must have been all over his face based on the little triumphant smile Steve was wearing. That had been exactly what Tony had intended to do.

"That's Howard talking."

Tony swallowed past the strange panic that came from hearing Steve say his father’s name. "Yeah. Trying to work on that. You know how it is; can't disassemble Rome in a day."

Steve nodded. “Howard is the only thing left on my list, Tony. Selfishly, I wouldn’t even try to change the way he treated you. Everything he did left a mark, and those are the things that make us who we are.” Steve shrugged. “And I love who you are.”

Tony sucked in a painful breath at this, and not just because of the fractured rib. He wasn’t sure he’d ever really get used to Steve saying things like that, no matter how much he worked on his daddy issues.

“Still want to sock him in the jaw, though.”

Steve looked so damned serious about it, so of course it was only a matter of moments before they were both cracking up.

“Ow,” Tony wheezed, holding his side as he struggled to stop laughing. “Not fair, Steve.”

“Sorry,” Steve sighed, slouching back against the couch again, wiping at the corners of his eyes. “Bucky’d hold him for me while I did it.”
“Might have to fight him for the first shot,” Tony added, running a hand over his face. “He was going to grab you, which is why I headed down here. You two talked?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, sounding a little sad.

“That good, huh?”

“You know how it is.” Steve shrugged his shoulders. “I wanted him to be angry at me.”

“So he blew your mind by just accepting it all instead?”

Steve smiled at this. “Pretty much. You know Bucky.”

“Yeah. He’s gotten me with that once or twice.”

“From what he said it wasn’t exactly easy for him, taking over for me.”

Tony sighed, rubbing absently at his side as if that could lessen the pain. “Wasn’t easy for either of us. We were right about him, being the person for the job but... Just don’t make him do it again anytime soon.”

“How good did he look in the uniform?” Steve asked, knocking his shoulder against Tony’s. “Bucky wasn’t just wearing it.”

Tony thought of the anguish, the outrage, that had been on James’s face when he’d first put on the uniform. Thought of him earlier in the day, out in the field. Steve was right—he’d taken to the role in a way few others could have. Tony had a feeling James had needed to know that about himself, that he wasn’t just Bucky Barnes or the Winter Soldier. That he was worthy of being Captain America.

“No. No, he wasn’t,” Tony agreed, smiling despite himself.

“Told him I’d be proud to follow him, if he wanted to keep it.” Steve sighed, scrubbed a hand through his hair. “He threw the shield at me.”

“Sounds about right.”

Steve cleared his throat. "I get to be his best man at your wedding."

Tony hung his head, not sure why he wanted to cry again. "You're okay with that?"

"Are you kidding? I'm more than okay with it, Tony. I'm looking forward to it."

"If you're suppressing more shit," Tony began, sounding surprisingly outraged.

"Tony, stop," Steve begged, grabbing hold of his hands. "Before? Sure. I still would have done it, and I'd still have been happy for the two of you, but yes, it would have hurt. More than hurt."

Tony studied his face as Steve tried to find the words he needed, that odd urge to smooth his hair and bounce him on his hip showing up again.

"Okay. So, admittedly, I still love you," Steve said, smiling. "But it's... It's different. It's a hell of a lot different. It doesn't hurt the way it used to. Uh, the physical attraction part isn't, um... Let's just say, anything like that would feel incredibly inappropriate now."

Tony stared at him for a moment, and gave into his weird residual parenting urge, smoothed the hair back on Steve's head, and smiled.
"It's because I've been changing your diapers, isn't it?"

Steve turned incredibly pink, and ducked his head. "Yes, actually," he answered dryly, giving Tony a pointed look. "Thanks for that, by the way."

Tony chuckled, and shrugged, but his heart was pounding away like he was in the middle of a warzone. "Was... Was that okay?" he asked, lowering his eyes, scared to see the answer before Steve gave it. "Not the diaper bit specifically, but..."

"Tony," and he had to look up, because Steve's voice cracked, and there he was looking all vulnerable again. Looking just like that little boy Tony had fallen so very much in love with. "Tony, it was—you were—amazing." Steve swallowed, and suddenly there were tears in his eyes. "I don't know if I can even explain how... how much I needed that. How wonderful it was."

Tony yanked him into a hug despite the agony it caused him, his side screaming in protest. It was worth it though. "This was easier when you were smaller," he said against the top of Steve's head.

"Yeah." Steve shifted so Tony wouldn't have to hold as much of his weight. "You, um, you were right. About the loneliness I was feeling. I'm going to use that code word one of these days."

"Anytime, anywhere," Tony swore, stroking Steve's back. "Halfway around the world if I need to."

"You and Bucky," Steve said, sitting back up. "Thank you for that. For taking such good care of me. I didn't want to stop being yours."

"You're still ours," Tony said, and it was true. "I might not ever get over that, you know. You kind of fucked my head up, Steve." He felt awful for saying it once he saw the effect it had on his friend. "No, stop, just wait a second." He took a deep, painful breath, and swallowed around the lump in his throat. "It was worth it. It was absolutely worth it, Steve. I'm pretty sure I needed it, too."

Tony chewed on his lip, and looked around the workshop. "I haven't been back upstairs, yet. Still, ah, still trying to cope with the idea of packing away all your clothes, and toys, and... and dismantling that life."

"Tony..."

"C'mon, cupcake, fair's fair. Let me get this out. Shit." Tony squeezed his eyes shut for a minute, then let himself sink back against the couch. "I don't think I want to get over loving that little version of you. I liked being your mom. Might keep doing it, actually."

"You're good at it," Steve said, taking one of Tony's hands in his. "Both of you are. I couldn't have asked for better."

Tony squeezed Steve's hand, stared at his fingers, remembering when they were much smaller. He'd held Steve's entire hand within his palm. Had wiped little fingers clean of paint and food and watched them grab hold of little duckies in the bathtub.

"I tried to give you everything I never had," Tony said eventually. "Scared the shit out of me at first, but... I loved every minute of taking care of you."

"You should give it a go for real."

Tony looked up at this, but Steve was very much serious. "Seems sort of selfish, doesn't it? Bringing a kid into all this."
"What we do, how we live? It might be crazy, but it's no crazier than the rest of the world, Tony."

Which was true enough, but still. It was too soon, everything was too raw to even consider the possibility.

"Maybe."

"I'm sorry," Steve said, squeezing Tony's hand almost painfully.

"Like I said, I think I needed it. There were things James needed to know, or maybe that I needed to let go of, and... Yeah, I don't think I'd have done any of that otherwise."

"Letting go isn't something I've ever been particularly good at," Steve admitted.

"Think I said the same thing about myself," Tony answered, smiling. He looked over at Steve, felt awash in love and appreciation. Maybe letting go could be okay, as long as you had good people around to catch you.

"What are you going to do now that you're all grown up?"

Steve shrugged. "I was thinking of growing a beard, actually."

Tony laughed again, wincing at the stabbing pain, but having trouble caring. "As long as you look good for the wedding photos. You need to bring a date, by the way. No going stag. And no platonic dates accepted."

Steve arched an eyebrow, then looked incredulous. "You're serious."

"Dead serious, sweetums. There's going to be dancing, Steve, and drinking, and people feeling romantic." Steve opened and closed his mouth a couple times, before shifting a bit, and scratching the back of his neck. Tony nudged his shoulder. "Take a chance on someone."

"This is a mom thing, isn't it?"

"Damn straight. If you don't pick someone, I'll pick for you. Any idea how much Darcy would pay for a shot at that ass?"

Steve burst out laughing, his head thrown back a bit as he let himself rock against Tony on the couch. Tony had come to the conclusion that this Steve Rogers was far and away quicker to laughter than the prior incarnation. Tony could see the difference shining in this Steve's eyes, and a very proud parent part of him wanted to shout, "I did that! I fixed him."

"Okay, okay. I'll take a chance. Please don't call Darcy."

"Deal." Tony continued to study Steve's relaxed features, and felt warmth settle over him. "You have someone specific in mind!"

Steve's mouth hung open before snapping shut again. "I don't know how I feel about you having mom powers."

"Pfft, about time I had some sort of superpower." Tony hoped Steve was thinking of who he was thinking of, and if he wasn't then some serious meddling was definitely going to be in order. "Steve?"

"Yeah?"
Tony bit down hard on his lower lip. "Thank you. For coming back. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"I hope neither of us ever has to go through that," Steve said, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "But whatever happens, Tony, just know that it's been an honor, calling you my friend."

Tony smiled, because really. Who would have thunk it? Certainly not his father. Certainly not that sad, lonely little boy he'd been once upon a time. Even the man he'd been a couple of years ago would never have dreamed this was where his life was leading him.

James was upstairs, waiting for him. Tony would go to him, and pull him into his arms, and tell him how much he loved him. Was going to spend the rest of his life with James. He had a real family, friends, could sit shoulder to shoulder with Captain America— with Steve Rogers—and know he deserved to be there.

"The honor has been all mine, Steve. Love you."

Steve grinned, kicked his feet out in front of him. "Love you, too, Tony."

"Hey, ah. Is there anything you wanted to keep? From upstairs, I mean."

Steve smiled. "You know, I sort of want that Captain America onesie Pepper tried to shove me into."

Tony hurt himself laughing again. "You're a sick man, Steve Rogers. I'll frame it for you."

"Heading up to see Bucky?"

Steve already knew the answer, since he got to his feet and helped Tony up.

"Yeah. I've kept him waiting too long."

They shuffled into the elevator together, Tony feeling lighter than he had when he'd headed to the workshop. Lighter than he had in ages.

"Could you send me some of the photos, too?" Steve asked as they stopped on his floor.

"I'm making you a whole album, baby."

Steve ducked his head, then leaned over and surprised Tony with a kiss to the cheek. "Tell dad I said goodnight."

"Yup. Will do."

Tony watched Steve walk down the hallway, counted down until he turned and looked over his shoulder, smiling and waving. Tony waved back, thinking of the little boy he'd left in Sam's arms earlier that day, aching with happiness and loss.

Counting down from ten, Tony let go. Just a little. Just enough. Tony leaned back and smiled at his reflection; he liked who he saw there, smiling back at him.

"Take me home, J."
Chapter Summary

Bucky was having a hard time deciding whether or not he actually had a problem on his hands. Tony didn't exactly have a reputation for being a good patient (he knew this all too well from first hand experience) so his compliance with Bruce's orders seemed suspicious at best.

Chapter Notes

For the anon. on tumblr who said, "I really like the idea of Bucky/Tony/Nat, idk why, but the idea of them snuggling & talking in Russian in order to have private conversations gives me warm fuzzies. Sadly there are no fanfics. Also overprotective assassin Russians, + hurt Tony"

Bucky was having a hard time deciding whether or not he actually had a problem on his hands. Tony didn't exactly have a reputation for being a good patient (he knew this all too well from first hand experience) so his compliance with Bruce's orders seemed suspicious at best.

He'd stayed in bed the entire day before, only getting up (with assistance, as instructed) to use the bathroom. He'd allowed Bucky to bring him food, had eaten it, then sank back down against the pillows and stayed put. All day. All through the night, even. No attempts to sneak off to the lab or the workshop, no working by proxy through JARVIS, no, “I’m just catching up!” excuses while he dove headfirst into backlogged Stark Industries business.

He'd just followed Bruce's orders.

Bucky had been suspicious enough the first day, assuming he was being lulled into a false sense of security, but now he’d moved directly onto being concerned. Tony never followed doctor's orders as a matter of pride. He was almost physically incapable of staying still, or taking it easy, and the man was stubborn enough to give Steve a run for his money.

"It’s weird" he said, shrugging his shoulders. “He’s actually taking it easy.”

"Seriously?” Clint pulled a face. "Come on, it's Tony—this has to be a trick. Remember when the Fucktastic Four gave us all that Doom-modified flu virus? The dude was running a fever of 104, puking his guts up like the rest of us, but does he drink fluids and rest? No, not even close!”

"I know. He built that nightmarish robot to clean up the vomit,” Bucky agreed with a shiver, dread washing over him as behind his closed eyes he saw the hoses whipping around, heard the disembodied artificial voice, calling to them...

"We don't talk about that," Natasha reminded them sharply. “Ever.” Bucky sighed, glad to have his thoughts interrupted.
Clint winced apologetically, shuddering. "Sorry. But my point stands! I bet if we had JARVIS tell us what he's up to right now, Tony'll have at least two StarkPads in the bed with him, and, like, three or four new prototypes he's working on."

Bucky worried at his lower lip. "How 'bout it, J?"

"I'm afraid that is not the case, sir." Even the A.I. sounded concerned. "I've been instructed to divert any outstanding R&D requests to Mr. Parker. Additionally, Mrs. Potts-Hogan has cleared sir's calendar for the foreseeable future."

Clint, Natasha, and Bucky exchanged worried glances. "So what's he doing?"

There was a long, uncomfortable sounding pause, but JARVIS eventually answered, "He appears to be resting."

"Sleeping?" Bucky asked hopefully.

"Sir is awake, merely lying in bed."

"Okay, that's terrifying," Clint announced. "What the fuck? Are we sure there wasn't a body swap?"

Bucky felt his stomach clench painfully. "No, it's him. J, get me Bruce on the line."

After a short wait, they were connected. "Everything okay?"

"Tony is behaving," Bucky blurted.

"Is he dying?" Clint asked, followed by, "Ow!" a second later when Natasha cracked him upside the head. "What? Not telling anyone he's dying is sort of his standard operating procedure."

You could almost hear Bruce removing his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose over the speakerphone. "He's not dying, he's just... hurt. And, oh, I don't know."

"Bruce," Natasha said, obviously sensing there was more.

"Maybe he's feeling his age a bit?"

That made Bucky feel a little bit better at least. He'd been just as concerned as Clint that there were complications Tony had neglected to mention. Knowing there was nothing seriously physically wrong was reassuring, but that didn't alleviate his concerns any. Historically speaking, Tony’s psychological wounds were far more damaging than the physical ones had ever been.

"Thanks, Bruce."

"I'm, uh, sort of in the middle of things, but I can wrap it up if you need me?" It was clear from Bruce’s hesitation that this wasn’t ideal, but that he was more than willing to backburner his work if it would help Tony.

"No, we've got this," Natasha answered before Bucky could say anything.

The three of them stood in silence for a moment, Bucky thinking of how quiet Tony had been, the way he'd just let Bucky fuss over him without any protest. Almost like he'd given up. It just wasn't right seeing Tony look so defeated.

In fact, just before heading down, he'd offered to help Tony to the common area, thinking company might be good for him, but he'd opted to stay in bed instead with a soft assurance of, "I'm fine here.
Go see how the others are doing."

Bucky sighed, and got back to work assembling sandwiches to take upstairs, wondering how he should go about getting Tony out of his funk.

"We'll need cookies," Natasha pointed out.

"On it," Clint said, snapping off a salute.

Bucky opened his mouth to ask what she was talking about, but Natasha arched an eyebrow at him, and he kept quiet.

"Make some popcorn, too," she instructed, and began working her fingers through her hair, mussing it up. "I'll be back in five."

"Will do." Clint had a bag of popcorn in the microwave before Bucky had time to blink. "What do you think, Buck, *Die Hard?"

"How about something without terrorists taking hostages, and people falling off of buildings to their death?" Bucky suggested. "Actually, avoiding violence in general would be good."

Clint winced. "Right, okay. Executive decision: we're going all in with romantic comedies. Yo, JARVIS," Clint called, his face scrunched up almost adorably with determination as he flitted about the kitchen, gathering ingredients for his cookies, "you're now officially part of Operation Iron Snuggle."

There was a weighty pause before JARVIS answered, "As a non-physical entity, I find myself curious as to how, precisely, I am meant to participate in said operation."

Clint rolled his eyes and shot a look Bucky’s direction as if to say, "Can you believe this guy?"

“By queuing up my ‘Had a Colossally Bad Day’ playlist, for a start,” Clint explained, whipping a bag of chocolate chunks at Bucky’s face. “You’re on hot chocolate patrol, Barnes. Maybe mix a little coffee in there, too. We all know how much the hubby loves his coffee.”

Bucky bit into his lower lip in an attempt to stop himself from grinning like a goon. He knew it was silly, but things were new enough that he still got an immense thrill whenever someone referred to Tony as his husband.

“On it,” Bucky answered, then jumped in surprise when he realized Natasha had returned.

She had changed into comfortably beat up looking clothing, including an oversized, soft looking, dark grey shirt, and sleep pants covered with little cupids. Her hair was messier than it’d been when she’d left, the makeup removed, and as a result he could now see the areas of her face that had been bruised in the battle the day before. The wardrobe change also meant that her bandaged wrist was now visible, as were various other scrapes and bruises.

“I’ll head up first,” she announced, grabbing the tray of sandwiches and the popcorn.

Bucky watched her go, impressed with how well Natasha knew Tony. If she’d just shown up to try to keep him company she’d have met resistance, but looking the way she did now there was no way Tony would be able to shut her out.

In fact, by the time he and Clint arrived with cookies and hot chocolate, the two were already watching what looked to be a Sandra Bullock romantic comedy together, Natasha curled up on the
bed beside Tony, who was halfheartedly eating one of the sandwiches.

The smile he received upon arriving was (almost surprisingly) relieved, tight around the edges, as if Bucky had been gone for hours. Combined with the dark circles under his eyes, the bruises, and the stitched up gash on his forehead, it made for a rather pathetic sight. It didn’t help that Tony’s broken leg was stretched out in front of him, propped up on a pillow. At least the cast now sported a get well message from Natasha in flowery cyrillic script.

“You started without me?” Clint whined, throwing a cookie. Natasha caught it (of course), and arched an eyebrow.

“Don’t get crumbs in their bed,” she scolded, adding, “and you’ve seen this enough times to have the dialogue memorized.”

Bucky distributed the hot chocolate before sliding into place on Tony’s left, dropping a kiss on the top of his head as he did so. Almost immediately, Tony slouched closer, taking another bite of his sandwich.

“You brought reinforcements?” he asked softly, side eyeing Clint.

“Family, dingbat,” Clint answered around his mouthful of food.

Instead of executing a typical Clint flop maneuver, he carefully settled onto the bed, also on Tony’s right side. Instead of sitting next to Natasha as Bucky had expected, he positioned himself closer to the foot of the bed, half sprawled next to Tony’s legs, and began sipping loudly at his hot chocolate.

Bucky waited, almost expecting Tony to protest, make a little fussy scene and kick them all out of the bedroom, but instead he looked suspiciously touched. “Gimme a cookie, then.”

Clint extended the tray of cookies in Tony’s direction allowing him to help himself, eyes never leaving the screen.

Tony chewed petulantly, but his eyes widened in appreciation as soon as he took a sip of the hot chocolate. "Normally, I'd object to messing with the perfection that is coffee, but this is amazing."

He gave Bucky a smile that looked a little less pathetic, and took another big sip.

Later, if someone had asked Bucky what the first movie was about, he wouldn’t have been able to answer. (Something involving guns and pageantry?) He was too busy paying attention to his Antoshka, watching the careful way he moved, the tightness around his eyes, and jaw. He was too absorbed with studying the various scrapes and bruises, which looked somehow worse now that they were healing up.

It was always difficult, being reminded how fragile (Tony would kick him in the shin for using that word) he was compared to him, or Steve, or Hulk, or Thor. None of them were truly safe—things just didn’t work out that way for them—but that didn’t make it any easier.

Once he’d finished eating, he couldn’t help himself, had to wrap his arm around Tony’s shoulders, and was relieved when Tony snuggled up against him, wriggling around until he was comfortable. Bucky felt some of the tension leave Tony’s body as he settled in, and was glad of it, buried his nose in Tony’s hair and just breathed in his scent.

More surprising still, Tony didn’t complain in the least when Natasha shifted closer, passing pillows forward so Clint could sprawl more comfortably in front of her. She helped herself to Tony’s right hand, interlacing their fingers, even as she draped a leg over Clint’s shoulder. He wrapped his arm
around her leg, and opted to use Tony’s own uninjured leg as an armrest, fingers curling around a calf.

For a couple of minutes, everyone seemed to be waiting for Tony to suddenly realize he was in the middle of being snuggled by a pile of assassins and freak out, but when that didn’t happen, everyone (Tony included) relaxed, and if anything, shifted even closer to each other.

“I feel like Pepper tried to make me watch this once,” Tony said after the second Sandra Bullock movie began.

“I’d take you over Hugh Grant any day.” Clint shoved another cookie into his mouth before adding, “Take the pain meds. At least for a couple days.”

Bucky bit the inside of his cheek, feeling like an idiot. He’d been giving Tony everything Bruce had prescribed, but he hadn’t actually watched him take the pills. It explained the controlled, unnatural silence, the careful way Tony had been holding himself. He should have known.

Still curled against him, Tony sighed, retrieved his hand from Natasha in order to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Sobriety, ah… It’s not always easy for me. Kinda sucks, actually, but it’s better than the other option.” He cleared his throat. “I can manage without.”

Without saying anything, Natasha took custody of Tony’s hand again, this time jamming her thumb into a spot on his palm hard enough that Bucky winced in sympathy. Tony let out a little groan of pure pleasure that sounded especially obscene to Bucky, considering the circumstances under which he normally heard those sorts of noises.

“What the everloving fuck, Nat?” Tony gasped, sounding more like himself than he had since he’d been injured.

“Pain can be your ally,” she explained, smiling sweetly. “Pills just dull the senses.”

“Which gets your ass killed,” Clint added in a singsong way that made Bucky suspect they’d had this conversation many, many times.

Tony made another little noise, and squirmed a bit, his hair tickling Bucky’s nose. “I love you so much right now,” he said all in a rush. “James—oh—take notes.”

Clint sniggered, but Natasha gave him a little smack upside the back of his head before he could make any lewd comments about the many other ways in which Bucky could potentially distract Tony from his pain.

For his part, Bucky whispered a soothing little stream of consciousness in Russian into Tony’s ear, little declarations of love, and appreciation, and increasingly ridiculous terms of endearment, until Tony was actually laughing.

“My little iron hedgehog?”

Bucky grinned. “What, too much?”

“Your hair is pretty crazy right now,” Clint pointed out.

Tony made a little noise of protest, but let it go, opting instead to snatch up Bucky’s left hand with his own, clinking their rings together (tink, tink, tink), a habit he’d developed since they’d exchanged them. It always reminded Bucky of the way he tended to tap against the arc reactor, and he kind of (definitely) loved when Tony did it.
Clint held up his hand, and without asking, Natasha handed him the marker she’d used to sign Tony’s cast. Clint got to work, scribbling away, until what Bucky assumed was meant to be an iron hedgehog was in place, posing dramatically. A little archer was beside him, yanking out a quill in order to use it as an arrow. The caption (Bucky’s little Iron Hedgehog and his trusty friend, Handsome Hawkeye) was printed beneath in tidy cyrillic, keeping with the theme.

“We should have Steve draw little versions of all of us on there,” Bucky suggested.

“Not sure I can handle wearing a mini-Coulson,” Tony said, but he was smiling.

Clint laughed, and popped the cap back off of the marker, adding to his drawing with what looked to be a tiny Coulson with hearts in his eyes, hands clasped and mouth hanging open comically as he admired the Handsome Hawkeye. “And perfect!”

Tony retrieved his hands from Natasha and Bucky, shifted and wriggled until he pulled his phone out from under his pillows, and snapped off a photo. “Now it’s perfect,” he declared, sending the photo off to Phil with a flourish.

Bucky and Natasha exchanged glances; Tony acting up with a bit of technology in his hands was much preferred to a quiet, behaving Tony Stark.

“Please, he knows he wants me,” Clint said with forced nonchalance. He shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth, and passed the bowl around so the others could help themselves.

Tony fiddled some more with his phone. “Ask him out to dinner already.”

No one commented on the fact that the tips of Clint’s ears had turned suspiciously pink. “That’s not how I woo.”

“Okay, then drop out of the vents and into his bed naked.”

“That was one time,” Clint protested, “and totally not my fault. Or, erm, intention. Thor’s Asgardian mead should be illegal.”

Tony just chuckled, and ruffled Clint's hair before settling back down to watch the movie. They all snacked in comfortable silence, until Tony cleared his throat and said, "thanks," sounding almost shy.

"Family,” Natasha said by way of an answer, and rested her head against Tony's shoulder.

"Right on," Clint added, and began adding miniature versions of Natasha and Bucky to his drawing.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took forever!! I've had crazy life things happening, but I'm hoping to actually be able to write with more frequency again, but, we'll see...

Meanwhile, oops, they got married! And Clint has a crush on Coulson (I mean, I can't help myself, they're too good together). And how can anyone resist snuggly assassins?!

Anywho, I've missed you all. *squish* Happy New Year!
The Sound of Plural

Chapter Summary

Steve Rogers enjoyed running. Possibly more than any person should, really, but even his love of running didn’t explain his inability to stop grinning like a lunatic during his morning run. He was trying desperately to smother a goofy smile each and every time it forced its way back onto his face, but if he thought he was going to get it past Bucky, he was dead wrong.

Once he’d woken up enough for his brain to function, the reason why became immediately obvious, and Bucky couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “Oh my god, you got laid!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve Rogers enjoyed running. Possibly more than any person should, really, but even his love of running didn’t explain his inability to stop grinning like a lunatic during his morning run. He was trying desperately to smother a goofy smile each and every time it forced its way back onto his face, but if he thought he was going to get it past Bucky, he was dead wrong.

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“Oh my god, you got laid!”

Bucky’s suspicions as to the reasons why Steve looked to be on Cloud 9 were officially confirmed when Steve ran into a tree. This was mostly because the accusation had caught him entirely off guard, prompting him to turn—all wide, guilty eyes—and gape at Bucky. By the time he’d spun back around, there was no way to avoid the tree.


Stifling a laugh, Bucky helped his friend up, clapping him on the shoulder before poking him in the side. “You’re glowing, Stevie. He’s that good in bed?”

Steve was bright red in the face, and it definitely wasn’t from the run. “Buck, stop, I’m begging you.”

“Why? What’s the big deal?” He was being serious, because he sure as shit hoped Steve hadn’t gone and gotten himself convinced that Bucky had a problem with him and Sam seeing each other. “We all know you’re together, Steve, it’s kinda obvious.”

“Well, yeah, I’d hope so. He was my date to your wedding, Buck. That’s a pretty shitty way to keep something under wraps.”

Bucky gave his friend a playful shove. “So what gives?”

Steve opened and closed his mouth a few times, before downright cringing. “It’s… Hell, maybe it’s a
side effect. All I know is the idea of talking with you about my sex life is, uh, horrifically mortifying.”

Bucky blinked at him for what felt like a solid minute, thoughts and memories and emotions all colliding together in a jumble, leaving him temporarily tongue-tied. Just for a moment, he could see Steve as a baby again (tiny fingers patting insistently at Tony’s lips, demanding he speak in English) which brought with it the vertigo sensation of trying once again to pin down who and what Steve was to him. The brother he’d never had? His best friend? His son? All of those?

“But you’re happy,” he finally managed, figuring the one thing all of the roles had in common was love. “Right?”


“Good. Although, I’m surprised Sam still wants you, what with that sorry excuse of a beard you’re growing.”

Steve scratched at his jaw, grinning ear to ear. Gone was the clean shaven Steve Rogers they all knew and loved. “Shut up, you’re just mad because Tony made you shave yours off.”

Post-baby Steve had decided to take advantage of his return to adulthood by growing a beard, which had led to Clint growing one, which meant Bucky really had no choice but to participate, turning the whole affair into a competition. Of course, once it was time for the wedding, Tony demanded they all shave, claiming only he, Sam, and Thor had facial hair worthy of photographing.

Afterwards, he’d more or less insisted Bucky not grow it back again, much to Steve’s delight.

“But Steve’s growing his back,” Bucky had pointed out over a group dinner, only to have Tony come back with, “Cap pulls it off. Yours makes me think scruffy-looking nerf-herder.”

As a result, Steve was lording his beard over Bucky whenever he got the chance.

Bucky flipped him off, then pulled him into a half-hug, giving in to the urge to muss up Steve’s hair, and kiss the side of his head. Steve gave him a playful shove, and took off running again, leaving Bucky to play catch up.

“You two are adorable, by the way,” he called, sprinting past Steve.

His lead didn’t last very long. There was a little smack to the back of his head, and then Steve was rushing onward, giving a little whoop of triumph. “Says the newlywed.”

“No that newly,” Bucky countered, but even the heavy breathing of his run couldn’t hide the underlying layer of sappiness in his voice. Unable to help himself, Bucky worried at his wedding band with his thumb, reassuring himself that it was still there, around his finger, right where Tony had placed it.

“According to Sam, you’re considered a newlywed for the first two years of marriage.”

“Oh, is that what Sam says?” Bucky asked, unable to resist breaking into a teasing sort of sing-song. “Whatever. I’m okay with being adorable.”

Up ahead, the Tower came into view, and Bucky felt his smile grow, a warm sort of excitement flooding his chest. When he glanced to his right, Steve was looking equally anxious to get back home, probably because Sam had finally moved his ass into the Tower with them.
Feeling buoyed by happiness, Bucky dug deep and found another burst of speed, which led to him and Steve frantically racing for the entrance, scaring the daylights out of the few pedestrians up early enough to be in their way.

They were laughing by the time they all but collapsed together in the elevator, slouched shoulder to shoulder against the back.

When he could speak again, Bucky grinned up at the camera. “Hey, J. Anyone up yet?”

“Mr. Wilson and Doctor Banner are in the communal kitchen, preparing breakfast,” JARVIS said, prompting Steve to give a little fist pump of triumph. Considering he could hear Steve’s stomach growling, Bucky wasn’t sure if it was more for Sam, or the idea of breakfast. “Sir is awake, as well.”

“Workshop?” Bucky figured he could pop up for a quick shower, then head down to grab Tony on the way to breakfast.

“You’ll find him in the penthouse,” JARVIS answered, and something about it felt off.

Thankfully, Steve was too preoccupied with his own lovesick thoughts to notice, busy watching the elevator’s display as the numbers ticked up to the communal floor. “I’ll try to save you something,” he said, darting out as soon as the doors opened.

“Eat all the bacon and you’re grounded!”

The doors slid shut, cutting off Steve’s laughter, and leaving Bucky staring at himself in the doors. “He okay, J?”

“I believe so,” JARVIS answered. “He can be found in your meditation room.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

The ‘meditation room’ hadn’t been used for that purpose in ages, mostly because there was a hotrod red crib still sitting in there, along with toys, and clothes, and everything else they’d managed to accumulate for Stevie in the short time they’d been a family of three. As far as he knew, Tony hadn’t been back in the room since they’d packed everything up.

Bucky stepped out into the penthouse, and sure enough, the door to Steve’s room was wide open, and Tony was standing inside, leaning heavily on his crutches. That brought Bucky up short, because Tony had shoved the crutches into a closet the moment the cast had come off. Bruce had given him the okay to walk on the leg (as long as there wasn’t pain) so he could rebuild the muscles in his calf, and while he’d had a limp for a bit, even that was more or less gone.

Swallowing around a sudden lump in his throat, Bucky continued on into the room. “Hey, Antoshka.”

Tony gave a little twitch, but was smiling when he turned to look over his shoulder. “Mm. Sweaty husband. You always give me the nicest gifts.”

Unable to help himself, Bucky stepped in close, cupped Tony’s face, and kissed him. Softly, sweetly. Then again, and once more for good measure after that, watching Tony’s eyelids droop a bit. When he pulled away, Tony swayed forward, grabbing hold of his shoulder for balance, then made a displeased sound when his hand came into contact with Bucky’s damp shirt.

“Ew, on second thought, clean husbands are nice. Sweaty is only fun when I’m the one getting you that way.”
Bucky kissed him once more, quick, on the corner of his mouth, then stepped away to make a show of looking around the room. Along one wall was the half finished (but still beautiful) mural Steve had been painting, the Brooklyn of their childhood peeking out through time and space.

“I should have Steve finish the mural.”

Tony pressed his lips into a thin line, and nodded. “Right.”

He wasn’t making eye contact, though, was staring at the crib, mouth twitching at the corners. “Antoshka?”

“We should probably get rid of all this shit, too, huh?”

Bucky looked over his shoulder, and felt his stomach give a little twist. Tony had pulled out Stevie’s favorite shirt (red, with the duck on it) and draped it over the side of the crib. The wagon Bucky had picked out was tucked under the crib, along with a box of all the little bath toys they’d had a love-hate relationship with.

And there it was again, that strange feeling like someone had played a trick on him, forcing him into something he hadn’t wanted, only to yank it all away when he realized how very wrong he’d been. Once they’d been in the thick of it, Bucky understood that parenthood was only terrifying because recognizing it was something he wanted would change everything about their lives.

He thought of Tony, soaking wet, and with fingerpaint still in his hair, the two of them trying to get Stevie cleaned up, and failing miserably. He’d only been joking when he’d said they were awful at it, but Tony had instantly come back with, “Personally, I think we’re awesome,” the absolute certainty right there in his voice, and shining in his eyes.

“What if I don’t wanna get rid of it?” Bucky blurted, grabbing for the shirt. The idea of giving it all away left him unsettled, and a little sick to his stomach.

Tony reached out, and traced the duck with his fingertips, then pulled his hand back and shoved it into his pocket. “So, what, we keep it all locked up in here forever? Come in every once in a while, cry over what could have been?”

Bucky blinked back his sudden tears, and swallowed around the lump in his throat. He knew Tony well enough to recognize what he was doing. Every time Bucky tried to talk sense into him, though, Tony came back at him with perfectly rational reasons why it was a horrible idea for twosuperheros to adopt a child. The problem was, Tony desperately wanted (needed) Bucky to change his mind, make it okay for him to say yes.

“No. We stop pretending we’re gonna go back to normal—whatever the hell that was—and admit that we both want to adopt a kid, already.”

Although he didn’t regret the words, Bucky still winced over the bluntness of the confession, the way his voice had gone all loud and angry at the end. He’d never quite come out and said it like that before. But it was true. He missed being a father more than he missed his flesh and blood arm.

Even though he knew Tony had been better at it (better than anyone had expected, especially himself), Bucky had been right there with him, thrown into the deep end of parenting. He’d changed diapers, and stayed up with a crying baby, rocked him to sleep, or tickled Steve until he squealed. Had spent hours just holding Steve, nose tucked into his soft hair, desperately attempting to burn the sensation into his memory, knowing at any minute it could be taken away.
Tony was staring at him like he couldn’t decide whether he should be crying, shouting, or running away. Bucky sighed, and stroked his cheek. “Antoshka… I know you miss it as much as I do. More, even. Why the hell are you still fighting me on this?”

“No one is going to give us a kid.”

And there it was. Tony had talked on and on about all the reasons why people shouldn’t, but this was the first time he’d phrased it quite like that. As if he’d finally decided this was something worth being selfish and irrational about, only to come to the realization there was no hope.

“Bullshit.” Tony blinked, as Bucky tapped against the arc reactor. “I happen to know for a fact that my husband is a genius who’s overcome some pretty ridiculous odds to get where he is today.”

“James,” he said, but Bucky could already feel the tide turning in his favor. Tony was leaning into his touch, and looking at him with hope in his big brown eyes.

“We can find a way to make this work, Antoshka.”

Tony swallowed, ducked his head, then looked up again, all searching intensity. “You’re sure this is something you want? We can’t exactly give a kid back if we change our minds.”

“Don’t you want to be a dad again?” Bucky countered.

“No,” he said, but Tony was smiling. “That’s all you. I’ll stick with being mom.”

The giddiness caught him by surprise, bubbling up and leaving him anxious, and excited, and very much interested in kissing Tony again. Bucky decided that wasn’t a bad idea, as far as ideas went, so he took away Tony’s crutches, and propped them against the crib, then turned back around to pull him up and into his arms, leaving his feet dangling above the ground.

“I love you,” he explained between fervent kisses.

Tony’s fingers wound through his hair, tugging gently. “Love you, too. James,” and he wriggled, trying to escape, smile there and gone and there again. "It's not that simple."

Bucky set him down, laughing when Tony pulled a face and looked at his shirt, which was now damp with Bucky's sweat. "Sorry."

Tony picked at the fabric, mouth going all twitchy again. So Bucky grabbed his hand, and tugged, leading him out of the room. "Come on. Talk me through it."

"Through what?"

"Your plan. I know you have one," Bucky insisted, squeezing Tony's hand. "I can hear it in your voice."

Tony squeezed back, but then dug in his heels. "Yeah, okay. Maybe. I've been thinking about it more." He blinked up at Bucky, and gave a little nod toward the bathroom. "Go shower. I'll make us breakfast."

It seemed ominous somehow, reminded Bucky of a conversation with Pepper about omelets. "You will?"

"I'll toast you a bagel, and make coffee," Tony said with a smile, but there was an edge to his voice, and he was pleading with his eyes.
'Alright. If that's what you want. I'll be right back.'

Tony nodded, pressed a kiss to Bucky's hand, then let go and headed for the kitchen, ghost of a limp altering his gait. Bucky took a deep breath, then headed off to take as quick a shower as humanly possible.

Under the spray of water, his mind raced. He wasn't worried about them, exactly. Tony wasn't going anywhere without Bucky, and vice versa. But he also wasn't naive enough to think what they were proposing was in any way, shape, or form easy. Couples ran into issues adopting all the time, especially same-sex couples. Add in the dangerous nature of their lives and it was no wonder Tony was running low on optimism.

Bucky tugged on clean clothes, ran a comb through his hair, then headed out, mildly surprised to find Tony had managed to put together a halfway decent spread. Bacon, eggs, the aforementioned bagel, and some fruit.

"I cheated," Tony said, spotting the surprise that must have been all over Bucky's face. "Bruce and Sam made breakfast. But I did toast the bagel, so..."

Bucky walked around the table, tipped Tony's face up with a finger beneath his chin, and dropped a kiss onto his waiting lips. "Thank you, breakfast thief."

Feeling stranded somewhere between giddy and nervous, Bucky took a seat, along with a big bite of bagel, which meant he had his mouth full and almost choked when Tony announced, "I'm going to retire Iron Man."

"What?" he squeaked, coughing into his fist and letting his bagel fall back onto the plate. "Antoshka, I don't—"

"Been thinking about it a lot, lately," Tony interrupted, but he sounded less tense, more confident. It was as if saying the words out loud had made it all a reality, a relief. "I'm about to become a huge cliche here; I'm getting too old for this shit, James."

"You're not old," Bucky snapped, his heart hammering against his ribs.

Tony smiled. "You're biased, sweetheart. Age is more than a number. It's... This last time, being out of commission? Sure, the leg healed up, but it aches in the morning, and I have yet another collection of scars, and I don't know how the hell Nat and Clint bounce back so well, but I'm... It's going to catch up before too long, James."

Bucky swallowed around the tangle of emotions Tony's words conjured. "I know." He laughed to himself, even as he wiped hurriedly at his eyes to push aside the tears.

If he was being honest with himself, Tony's announcement wasn't even much of a shock. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd been waiting for this.

"Damn. I... Okay. Right." Bucky grabbed for Tony's hand and squeezed. "Guess I'm not surprised. Not really." Tony's eyebrows shot up, and Bucky started in on his breakfast again. "You obeyed doctor's orders, Antoshka."

"Fair enough," Tony snorted, and slouched back in his seat. "Not exactly what I'm known for, huh?"

Bucky stared into his mug of coffee. "I convinced myself you loved being an Avenger too much to give it up."
"Me too," Tony sighed, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "But my head's not in it the way it was, which makes me more of a liability to the team than an asset."

Even if it was true, it still sat wrong with Bucky having to hear Tony make the admission. It was unsettling to think of the Avengers without Iron Man, but leaving on his terms was a million times better than it happening because Tony had been killed in action. Bucky’s appetite slipped away at the thought.

“So what happens now?”

Tony sighed. “Well, I’d need to discuss it with Steve, but I was thinking Rhodey should take my place. I’m about ninety-eight percent sure he’d go for it. What do you think?”

Bucky toyed with his piece of bacon, suddenly feeling the weight of the shield on his back, just for a moment. Carrying it had changed him, even if it was only (thankfully) for a little while. “He’d be a great addition to the team,” he finally answered, some of Tony’s tension easing after receiving Bucky’s vote of approval. “I understand Iron Man is out of the picture, but what about Tony Stark?”

“What about me?” Tony countered, folding his arms across his chest.

“I honestly believe you can walk away from the field, Antoshka, but let’s not pretend you’re going to be able to sit on the sidelines entirely. We’re going to run into something we can’t wrap our heads around, or Steve’s going to need you to challenge him when he’s being too stubborn for his own good, or Reed will build something horrible. What then?”

Tony opened and closed his mouth a few times before opting to snatch up his mug, and swallow a large mouthful of coffee. “Well. I guess that’s when I provide a consultation,” he said with a smile. “Someone has to keep Richards in check.”

“So we don’t have to move out of the Tower?”

“No,” Tony rocked forward, looking caught by surprise. “No way, James. We’re all a family, now, and if we’re going to raise kids together, I want them to be surrounded by family. They shouldn’t ever have to feel alone the way I did.”

Bucky was hit by a wave of feelings (happiness, anticipation, gratitude, fear, sympathy) and had to lean over and almost throw his breakfast in order to kiss Tony.

“Kids?” was all he managed, letting the rest slide away.

Tony swallowed visibly, wide eyed. "Or kid, singular."

"I like the sound of plural," Bucky countered. He thought of his own siblings, and even though it hurt, it filled his heart to bursting. "Hell, if we're already going through the trouble of adopting one, the more the merrier."

"If we're even able to," Tony countered. "Money will help, but..."

As Bucky watched, Tony absently spun his wedding band, and chewed on his lower lip.

"Hey, before you get all worked up again about the impossibility of us adopting, let's have Pepper look into options."

Tony exhaled shakily, his eyes bright with gratitude when he looked up again. "Yeah. Okay, I'll call her later." Bucky handed over a piece of bacon, and Tony accepted, crunching on it thoughtfully.
“There’s also surrogacy, but I’d rather not go the Hollywood route.”

Bucky was already waving away the suggestion. “Right there with you. Already too many kids out there looking for homes. It’d feel… wrong, somehow?”

“Exactly.”

Looking at Tony, Bucky could see the change in him already, knew there wouldn’t be another conversation at three in the morning, Tony panicked over the idea of trading fatherhood (motherhood) for the hero business. The aftermath of Steve’s transformation had left a mark on him, on both of them—on the entire team, really—and for the first time, Tony seemed to fully embrace the change, to wear it with pride. More than any of them, he’d faced his demons, and come out the other side stronger for having done so.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, Antoshka.” Tony hung his head, ever shy in the face of compliments that mattered, then looked up through his lashes, eyes bright with emotion. “We’re really doing this.”

“Yeah, yeah we are.” Tony leaned over and grabbed another slice of Bucky’s bacon. “We’re going to be amazing at it, too.”

“Of course we are.” Bucky’s face hurt from smiling. “Did you care about gender, or race—” Tony was already shaking his head. “Good. Me neither.”

It was tempting to let himself get carried away, rush into Stevie’s room, straighten up, get it ready for the next occupant. Or occupants. Which was silly, of course. It could be years before they were able to adopt, and there was no guarantee they’d wind up with a child young enough to even need a crib, or a little red shirt emblazoned with a duck.

“Hey, JARVIS,” Bucky called, watching Tony begin eating breakfast in earnest. “What do you think, can you handle having a little brother or sister?”

Tony’s eyes went wide, his mouth hanging open a bit, as if Bucky had just done something amazing. “It would be a privilege, sir.”

At this, Tony all but leapt from his seat to get his arms around Bucky, which was a fine turn of events by his reckoning. Bucky pulled him onto his lap, wrapped him up tight, smiling against Tony’s skin.

“My family is the best family,” Tony insisted, punctuating the remark with a kiss.

“Speaking of family, when should we talk to the team?”

“Pepper first. Then Steve. And then we have our family meeting, I guess, see if anyone objects?”

“They won’t,” Bucky assured him, rubbing circles against Tony’s back. “Probably give us shit for taking so long.”

Tony laughed, wiping at his eyes, pushing aside his tears. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“We are going to be great at this,” Bucky said, feeling the certainty in his bones. “Look at what a good job we did with Stevie.”

“Oh, you were showering, so you missed him and Sam mooning over each other at breakfast,” Tony said, smile shifting toward mischievous. “Somebody got laid.”
Bucky burst out laughing, shaking enough that Tony tightened his grip so he wouldn’t fall off. “That’s what I said! No poker face, that kid.”

“Our little boy is all grown up,” Tony murmured, just a hint of melancholy in his eyes, there and gone again. “James. Thanks for being patient.”

“I knew you’d get there.” Bucky pulled him down for a kiss. “I love you, Antoshka.”

“I know,” Tony answered, grinning ear to ear. “Love you, too, James Buchanan Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a note on Tony retiring Iron Man. Um. Tony says a lot of things, okay? Let's just see how it plays out, shall we? *cough* because he is Iron Man and babies ain't gonna change that shit.

Meanwhile, it's been longer than I thought, apparently, uh... But we're back with more! Seriously, there has been so much Tony/Bucky writing going on over in imagine-ville that for me it feels like Regression Analysis just wrapped. And yet, here we are, 6 months to the day. Well, I shall do my best not to make you wait that long for the next bit! We'll either go back and enjoy their wedding, or go forward and enjoy their foray into parenthood. Mwahahahahaha...
Tony was pretty good at forgetting things like people’s birthdays, anniversaries, and the like (if anyone had any doubts, they could just ask Pepper), let alone the various holidays that most normal people observed. As a result, he wasn’t even remotely approaching suspicious when Steve asked if he could take Tony out to brunch.

James had been MIA for the offer, which probably should have tipped him off that something was up, but he’d been in the middle of a hostile takeover (okay, he’d been in the middle of practically jumping around Pepper's desk chanting “hostile takeover”) when Steve had called to make the plans.

“Are you not doing brunch?” Tony had asked, half sprawled on top of James in an attempt to keep him in the bed.

“Nah, got another thing with Clint. You two have fun. Maybe wear the brown suit.”

Tony had perked up a bit at that. “It’s a dress up brunch?”

But James had just rolled over, used his bodyweight to press Tony into the mattress, and kissed him. “Maybe I just like the way you look in the brown suit.”

So, feeling slightly overdressed for brunch with Steve, Tony had headed out, surprised when Steve was there waiting for him looking like a million bucks. Striped shirt with a vest and tie, nice slacks, beard neatly trimmed, and his hair all combed like he was heading to church.

“Don’t we look sharp,” Tony teased. "Got a hot date with Sam later?"

Steve smiled at this. "This is all for you, actually."

Tony wasn't sure what to say about that, so he opted for a shrug of acceptance, and following Steve into the restaurant. The place was jumping, and Tony had a moment's panic that they'd spend their meal being interrupted for Captain America autographs, but everyone they passed just smiled and then paid them no mind.

He was still scoping out the room, trying to get a bead on the vibe he was picking up when they were seated in the back, the table's position affording them a little more privacy.

"Is this some sort of trap?" Tony asked, readjusting the silverware in front of him.

Steve simply smiled indulgently. "No, Tony, it's brunch."

"Mm hmm. Nope, you're being sneaky about something. I can tell."

As Tony watched, Steve ducked his head and did the adorable little embarrassed thing, his ears turning a bit pink as he looked up through his lashes.

"Okay, you're not ready to talk about it, I get it," Tony said, smiling as their waiter came over.

They got started off with some coffee, and Steve intercepted the menus, ordering for both of them while Tony wracked his brain for ideas. Whatever was going on, Steve was obviously in a good
mood, so he didn’t need to worry. Probably.

"How are things between you and Sam?"

Steve’s smile grew larger, and Tony felt a little surge of happiness at the sight. As suspected, that was working out just fine, then. The two of them had been all but inseparable since the wedding.

"Good," Steve answered readily, ducking his head again. "It's... Was it strange for you and Bucky at first?"

Tony sipped his coffee and sighed contentedly. "What's the matter, pumpkin? Having trouble adjusting to happiness?"

Steve laughed a bit at this, settling back in his chair, eyes bright. "Yeah, a little. It's almost too easy with him. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"You get used to it," Tony assured him. "Although, I'm sure if you ask James he'll tell you it took forever before I actually got with the program. Kinda had to beat me over the head with the fact that he wasn't going anywhere, no matter what."

Steve nodded. "I get that. But, um. It's nice. It's really nice. We're planning a little road trip together next month. He has some old Air Force buddies he wants to visit."

"Well, help yourself to any of the cars," Tony offered, sipping more coffee as he looked around the room. "I hope you know we all think you're incredibly adorable together."

Steve chuckled. "That's the only reason we're doing it, so that's good to hear."

"Now we just need to get Clint and Phil together." Tony stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Might have to involve Pepper in my plotting and scheming. She always liked Phil."

As Tony watched, Steve shifted around in his seat, then waved to someone. Tony turned in his chair, confused as he spotted one of the waitstaff approaching with a package. Definitely suspicious. A quick glance showed him a nervous Steve.

“Here you are, Captain,” the young lady said, smiling as she handed it over.

Steve thanked her, then cleared his throat. “Um. This is for you,” he announced, looking incredibly hesitant. He tightened his grip on the package momentarily before leaning over the table and placing it in front of Tony. “I just... I hope you like it.”

For no reason at all, Tony was suddenly anxious. Beyond anxious. He looked at Steve again, then glanced around the room, then back down at the package. It was rectangular, not too large, not too heavy, carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied up with a bit of string. Tony’s fingers twitched as he pulled on one end, unraveling the little bow, and cautiously folded back the paper, Steve watching him intently the entire time.

And then.

“Holy shit.”

The sounds and smells of the restaurant seemed to fade into nothingness, everything growing quiet and still as Tony’s breath caught, and his eyes filled with tears before he’d even finished processing what it was he’d been given.
It was a painting. Watercolor, to be precise, beautifully, painstakingly done. It wasn’t just the quality of Steve’s work that was taking his breath away, it was the fact that he’d pulled back the brown paper and found the beautiful baby boy he still thought of every single day looking up at him. There little Steve was, smiling happily. He wasn’t alone, either. Tony was there, too, holding him, smiling down at him like he was the center of the universe, James on the other side, with an arm around them both.

“Shit,” Tony said again, his voice catching this time.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” Steve said, sounding a little choked up himself. “Hope it’s okay.”

Tony was sure some of the restaurant patrons were going to be confused as to why he was up and out of his seat and hugging Captain America during a Mother’s Day brunch outing, but whatever. He didn’t really have a choice in the matter.

“It’s beautiful, cupcake,” he swore, kissing Steve’s cheek and not even feeling a little ashamed over the fact that he was crying in public. “I love it.”

Steve hugged him back, and then Tony sat down and took a minute to wipe his eyes, laughing a little to himself. “Has James seen it yet?”

“Showed him the other day,” Steve admitted, grinning bashfully. “He might have cried, too.”

Tony traced a finger over the curve of one of Steve’s chubby baby cheeks in the painting, smiling to himself. “Never once did I imagine I’d be getting Mother’s Day gifts.”

“Life’s funny that way,” Steve said, reaching across the table to squeeze Tony’s hand. Steve cleared his throat, and gave him another squeeze. “Give it any more thought?”

Steve didn’t have to clarify; Tony knew exactly what he was asking. He nodded, smiling to himself. “Uh, yeah, now that you mention it. We’ve been talking adoption. Pepper is looking into some things for us.”

“That’s great,” Steve said, practically beaming at him. “I look forward to meeting my baby brother or sister.”

“Yeah, well, nothing has happened yet,” Tony sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “In all seriousness, I’m skeptical anyone will let us adopt. Financially, sure, we can handle a herd of kids, but…”

Tony sighed, not bothering to list all the reasons why any sane agency might be hesitant to let two male super heroes, one of whom was a former assassin, adopt a kid. Especially when they lived in a house full of heroes, in a building with a big A for a target on the side, and at least one of them had no intention of stopping the whole fighting the forces of evil thing any time soon.

“It’ll work out,” Steve swore, and oddly enough, hearing him say that actually made a difference. Made it sound like something that was safe to look forward to. “I can vouch for you both, when the time comes.”

“I’ll hold you to that. The Captain America seal of approval sure can’t hurt.”

Steve leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Anyone other than Pepper know?”

Tony smiled shyly, and shook his head. “Nope. This, um. James might have cornered me a couple days ago when I was moping over some of your old things.”
As if needing to reassure himself, Tony touched the painting again. “Thank you for this, Steve. I love it. Love you, too.”

“You’re welcome. And I love you, too, Mom,” Steve answered, smiling cheekily.

Tony laughed at this, and looked around the room at the other families—all the different combinations of them—out celebrating the day together. Never in a million years would he have thought he’d find himself out with Captain America, getting Mother’s Day gifts. Hell, the year before he’d have had a panic attack if someone suggested he be even tangentially involved in parenting.

Yet, here he was, his heart full of love and pride and happiness, out with his not-so-little cupcake, finding himself excited and hopeful at the idea of raising a kid with James. Maybe more than one.

“I hope you know you’ll be on the hook for babysitting.”

“You bet I am,” he answered happily. “We’ll all help, Tony. That’s what family does.”

Tony smiled down at the painting, then up at Steve. “Damn straight.”

Chapter End Notes

Awwww, Happy Mother's Day, Tony! And, it's officially official. They need and shall have a kid. We'll be back in this universe before too long, my dear friends. In the meantime, you can find me on tumblr cranking out Tony x Bucky with the awesome individuals over at Imagine Tony & Bucky.

End Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: http://dezinformatsia.tumblr.com/ and all of my Imagine Tony & Bucky fills can be found here: http://imaginetonyandbucky.tumblr.com/tagged/dezinformatsia

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