I've got you under my skin
by sirona

Summary

Five times Beijing 2008 Olympics Gold Medalist Tony Stark thinks it's going to be no more difficult a job to get ready for London 2012, than what he has just achieved. That is, of course, before Coach Fury comes to visit, and offers him a once-in-a-lifetime chance to be a part of something much bigger than himself. Swimming AU.

Notes

Written for c_im_bigbang’s RBB challenge. The incredible art that started off this whole thing belongs to Ashei, and can be found in this post, or on Tumblr. GO TELL ASHEI HOW AMAZING ZIE IS, TOO! <3333

Disclaimer: I don't own them. If you recognise any lines in this fic, they're not mine, either -- I have borrowed some from a couple of TV shows and movies. Also, I know nothing about competitive swimming. Every instance of getting something right is entirely due to Authocracy, who has been the most amazing help throughout, and without whom I would have scrapped this fic altogether. Every mistake you spot is mine and mine alone. I hope I have done the sport justice; and I heartily hope I don't offend anyone with my portrayal of it. It's certainly far from my intention.

Warnings: discussion of bullying, mentions of homophobia, strong language, Tony feels.

There's also a fanmix to this story, which can be found in this post.
THE MAN IN RED AND GOLD: "WE'RE JUST GETTING STARTED."

**TONY STARK** speaks out for the first time since 2004, only in **GQ America**

words by **Gabriella Ramirez**

*September, 2008*
It's a warm fall afternoon when I make my way through the lobby of Casa del Mar, five minutes behind schedule. I am not worried -- my subject is notoriously difficult to pin to a fixed point in time. And I'm right -- it's another twenty minutes before Anthony (Tony) Stark saunters inside the half-empty restaurant. He's wearing a steel gray suit that fits him like a glove, a truly extravagant patterned shirt, a tie that only just escapes ruining the ensemble, and big, movie-star sunglasses. He should look like a caricature. Instead, he looks every inch like the billions of dollars he's worth.

He stops to shake hands with a few people -- all captains of industry, I notice, and no, dear readers, you can't have their names. Suffice to say, Tony Stark commandeers respect for his business acumen, if not for his lifestyle choices. As the CEO of the family business that is the multi-billion Stark Industries, he has ushered in a new era for the aging corporation.

He approaches me at last, and I rise. I wait for him to introduce himself, because you've got to have been living under a rock to not remember that disastrous night several years ago, when Tony Stark came this close to hitting a photographer for calling him "Mr Stark" as he was coming out of a night club. Of course, Stark had been under severe emotional stress at the time, after losing his father, the illustrious Howard Stark, only a month previous. Nevertheless, this reporter is not going to take the risk.

To my surprise, Stark is charm personified when he reaches me and offers me his hand. "Hi, I'm Tony Stark," he says, easy and amiable. "Hello, Mr Stark," I venture cautiously. Not a blink of an eyelid from the man; I assume that I am safe.

Stark is one sharp man, I find out when his smile turns sardonic.

TS: You're thinking of the Great '04 Fiasco, aren't you.

Shamefaced, I nod. "Sorry."

TS: (waves a magnanimous hand) It's fine. You wouldn't be so good at your job, if you weren't -- and you're good, I can tell. D'you want to talk about that?

GR: Only if you want to, Mr Stark.

TS: Oh, all right, you've made your point. Call me Tony, for the love of God. Okay. You know already that it was a... difficult time in my life, having to take over the company from my father, assuming his role as well as his name. I did not react well to that, for which I am sorry, but what's done is done.

GR: Your father was a very important figure in your life. It's understandable that you may have reacted perhaps unwisely to a provocation at that time -- we all grieve in different ways.

Stark's mouth twists; there's a trace of bitterness in his voice when he speaks again.

TS: That is true. My father and I did not see eye to eye on a number of things, but we shared a passion for success, whether in swimming or pushing Stark Industries to the top of its game.

GR: It must have been terribly hard to lose your mother so soon after your father.

Stark's whole face flinches for a moment before he schools it again. I am sorry to bring this up, but I believe that in order to understand the man, we have to know where he comes from.

TS: Yes. It was very difficult. My mother was the person I spent most of my time with, after my
parents' divorce and my father's subsequent move to England with his new wife. It was also my mother who helped me come to terms with my father's death, and what that meant for my future. She is the reason I can accept that I am 'Mr Stark', now, much as I still feel people are addressing my father when they call me that.

GR: Mrs Stark was a remarkable woman. America is the poorer for her untimely passing. You have coped with your loss remarkably well, Tony, no one can deny that. Now, if I may ask a more personal question: you had not given any indication that you were thinking of a career in professional swimming before your father's death. Was your father's legacy your inspiration for throwing yourself into competitive swimming so late in life, compared to other swimmers in the circuit?

TS: He was one reason I decided to compete in the Olympics, yes. I have been swimming since before I could walk; both my mother and father encouraged me to pursue the sport at an early age. True, I didn't compete in meets, but I did the work behind the scenes, and it's paid off.

GR: Earning five gold medals is an amazing achievement. Congratulations!

Stark's face lights up with satisfaction.

TS: Thank you. I'm very happy with my performance.

GR: Many people believe that we can credit your coach, Obadiah Stane, for your incredible results at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

TS: Well, yes, Obie and I work well together. He pushes me when I need it, and he lets me take the time to work on Stark Industries' designs when they need my attention, too. It's a winning combination.

GR: I believe I can speak for everyone when I say that your father would have been proud. You must miss his guidance terribly.

TS: We didn't get to spend much time together after his move to England, where he was busy with his own work. I'm sure you know of his life-long commitment to philanthropy; in London, he coached orphans who could not afford swimming lessons. His duties and dedication to his project kept him pretty busy.

GR: Are you looking to break Howard Stark's record of seven Olympic gold medals at the London 2012 Games?

TS: I can only hope I will be in a position to make a go of it, certainly. We're just getting started, as far as I'm concerned.

Stark's phone goes off, and he makes an aborted movement towards it, stopping with his hand halfway there. He offers me an apologetic look and lets his hand fall again. I get the hint, however -- Tony Stark is a busy man.

GR: Tony, thank you so much for your time. Congratulations once again on an inspiring achievement.

TS: Thank you, Gabriella.

Stark shakes my hand again before rising and leaving, intent on his phone. GQ wishes him every success in the London 2012 Olympics in four years time; we can only hope he will triumph once
again. We'll be sure to be there to support him.

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Jarvis finds him playing the piano again. It's half past three in the morning, and the house is quiet - though it's just as quiet at three thirty in the afternoon, so that's not saying much. Tony doesn't look up, focuses instead on the smooth ivory of the keys, the flashes of black and white that accompany the soft music.

Jarvis doesn't say a thing, just leans against one of the columns that keep the roof from coming down on top of them. He always seems to know when Tony needs the quiet, which is remarkable considering Tony's love for running his mouth. After all, you gotta distract the vultures somehow, right? But right now the silence is soothing, calming instead of grating on Tony's nerves. He wonders briefly whether it's the time of day -- there's something about half three at night that invites the peace, fills his soul and lets him rest, if just for a little while.

"It wasn't that bad, sir," Jarvis says when the tune runs out from under Tony's fingers, a hush for the seconds before he picks out a new one. He may be hitting the keys a little harder than he ought, but he's certainly not going to talk about it.

Jarvis doesn't take the hint, but it's not like Tony expected him to. He waits him out for song after song, until Tony sighs and lets the notes fade, lets his head hang over his chest.

"They're never going to stop asking after him, you realise," Jarvis says evenly, which is good because sympathy right now might succeed where the heartless reporters failed and break him.

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Tony grumbles, but something inside him unwinds a little. His father has been dead for years, but no, they'll never stop trying to find out a little bit more about the enigmatic figure that was Howard Stark, or stop lauding his achievements, his dedication to the sport, his unbeaten run at the Gold. And like it or not, Tony will always be his father's son -- always second place -- until he manages to carve a spot for himself around Howard's larger-than-life legacy.

"You did very well, under the circumstances," Jarvis tells him, 'the circumstances', of course, referring to the fact that the car accident that killed Howard and his wife falls next week, on Tuesday. Tony already plans to spend most of the day in the workshop. The interview could not have been more serendipitously scheduled -- for the damned reporter, not Tony himself. At least this one had been nice, polite and well-meaning. Tony knows from personal experience that it could have been much, much worse.

"Thanks," he says quietly, because if Jarvis said it, he meant it. He's been with Tony all his life, it feels like, and Tony knows him just as well as the reverse is true. He'd been a steadying influence when Tony had needed one, a father figure Tony could look up to when the one that should have taken that place had been too busy with his pet project halfway across the world to pay attention to his own son.

Jarvis straightens, uncrosses his arms and sticks his hands in his pockets. He's almost twenty years Tony's senior, but he doesn't look it -- if you don't count the prematurely silver hair that makes him look stunningly handsome. His blue-grey eyes are as piercing as always, and Tony knows better than most the strength that lurks in those arms, the broad chest that his still-pristine shirt stretches
"Well, I'm for bed," Jarvis says. He looks tired, just a little, which for Jarvis pretty much means he's dead on his feet. "I'd tell you not to stay up too late, but, well."

Tony smiles faintly, strikes up "Say Goodnight Not Goodbye". He hears a huff of laughter behind him, then the soft sounds of Jarvis' shoes on the wooden floor -- a courtesy to him, because Jarvis can move as soundlessly as an assassin when he needs to (or when he's catching Tony sneaking out. It's been years since it last happened, but Tony knows for a fact that Jarvis has lost none of his skills).

Tony plays for a while yet, not thinking about anything -- especially not thinking about the interview that afternoon for GQ. He likes the magazine, fucking loves Dylan Jones, but the reporters for the American edition are a pack of rabid wolves when they think they've caught a scent. And yeah, Tony winning five gold medals in the Beijing Olympics is a pretty juicy story. America's Golden Boy of Swimming, heir to the vast Stark fortune as well as the Stark legend. He's prime press material, the more unhinged and perverted, the better. And god knows Tony's got a few ghosts in his cellar, courtesy of being left to his own devices much sooner than he ought to have been.

He plays, and he tries to forget. It's all he can do now; another Olympics over, four years to go until London, four years he can use to train harder than ever, make himself faster, pull himself apart to reach the very core of his performance, drive and drive until he gets where he knows he ought to be. Jarvis will help, of course, and so will Pepper, in between bitching about what he's doing to his body.

Four years. He's always liked having a target to work towards.

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Excerpt from CBC News article: Fina extends swimsuit regulations, Thursday 19th March 2009

World swimming governing body Fina has once again moved to limit the impact of the controversial hi-tech swimsuits. Swimmers will no longer be able to wear anything under their costumes after Therese Alshammar had a world record erased for wearing two swimsuits.

An extra suit can help swimmers compress their body and trap air, which provides greater buoyancy in the pool. There were 105 world records broken last year, 79 of them by swimmers wearing one suit, the Speedo LZR Racer.

Fina executive director Cornel Marculescu said: "Nothing must be worn underneath. One suit only, that's it."

Officials at the Australian Swimming Championships had said women were allowed to wear bikini bottoms for modesty purposes at the event but not a full suit and any world records set would not stand if they used them.

Following a recent three-day meeting in Dubai, Fina also stipulated swimsuits should not cover the neck and must not extend past the shoulders and ankles.
The changes, which will be in place for July's World Championships, also limit the thickness and buoyancy of the suits.

"Fina wishes to recall the main and core principle is that swimming is a sport essentially based on the physical performance of the athlete," read a statement from swimming's world governing body. Opponents of the hi-tech suits argue the buoyancy they create amounts to "technological doping".

Fina also intends to limit the use of non-permeable materials in the suits.

Suits to be used from 1 January 2010 will have to be put in for approval by 1 November.

And future submissions will have to be made 12 months in advance of a World Championship or an Olympic Games, with the approved models to be available at least six months prior to the events.

Fina will also publish a list of approved models and these will be used in competitions starting 1 January 2010.

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From: ostane@starkindustries.net  
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: March 19, 2009 06:50  
Subject: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS??  

STARK, YOU HAVEN'T BEEN ANSWERING MY CALLS. I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE IN THE POOL, GET OUT AND GET TO SI AS SOON AS YOU GET THIS. WE NEED TO WORK OUT A STRATEGY AND DAMAGE CONTROL BEFORE THE COMPANY DISSOLVES.

Obadiah Stane  
COO  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net  
To: ostane@starkindustries.net  
Date: March 19, 2009 07:45  
Subject: keep your pants on, i'm coming in

and learn to turn off capslock already
Anthony Stark  
CEO  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London  

---  

From: vpotts@pottspt.com  
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: March 22, 2009 11:00  
Subject: You missed your appointment. Again.  

And you're not picking up your phone. The least you could do is call and cancel, you know.  

Pepper  

Virginia Potts  
Physical Therapist  
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness  

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net  
To: vpotts@pottspt.com  
Date: March 22, 2009 14:33  
Subject: sorry  

yeah, god, no, sorry Pep, i've not been out of the workshop for i don't know, what day is it? you  
can't have missed the fina screwover, i know you keep an ear to the ground. look i can't right now  
i'm in the middle of polymer testing call you later?  

tony  

Anthony Stark  
CEO  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London  

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: March 22, 2009 14:46
Subject: Re: sorry

Oh, God, I didn't even think. Of course. Though please remember to eat sometime, that body of yours won't run itself. I don't want to fish you out of the swimming pool again because you haven't been eating properly and you collapsed during training. Once was enough for a lifetime. And you can't pause your training like that, I don't care what Obadiah says. You're only more likely to injure yourself this way.

Call me when you can, and *don't run yourself into the ground*. Doctor's orders.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: March 23, 2009 00:48
Subject: i love you, have i told you this lately?

i'm okay Pep. i don't have the time, i got to get this research in so i can start testing, i can't trust the r&d morons to get it right. look i might not be able to make it over for a while. i promise i'll keep training.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: May 01, 2009 09:13  
Subject: Call me.

Tony, it's been over a month. What is going on with you? Do I need to come over there and drag you out of the labs by your bird's nest of hair?

I don't like this, Tony. You are going to pull something at this rate. You know you can't keep your shape if you don't keep your training regimen and regular PT sessions. Three years isn't such a long time, you know.

Pepper

Virginia Potts  
Physical Therapist  
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com  
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: May 05, 2009 09:08  
Subject: Call. Me.

Anthony Stark, you don't get to ignore my emails. Do I need to take this up with Obadiah?

Pepper

Virginia Potts  
Physical Therapist  
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com  
To: ostane@starkindustries.net  
Date: May 07, 2009 09:12  
Subject: Tony

Obadiah,

Are you aware of what Tony's schedule is like right now? He is going to injure himself at this rate, you know it as well as I do. I care about Stark Industries as much as you do, but I also care about
Tony. Please, please intervene.

Virginia Potts

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: ostane@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: May 15, 2009 15:22
Subject: Re: Tony

Virginia,

There is no need to be concerned. Tony is merely prioritising his commitments, and right now his energies are needed elsewhere. This is not affecting his training regime negatively. He's a fighter, he'll put in the hours when it counts.

Obadiah Stane
COO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: May 22, 2009 19:47
Subject: Tony, please.

I can’t watch you ruin everything you have worked so hard for. You did it once, but I'm not sure you can come back to peak performance again without working for it consistently. You're 22 years old; you know as well as I do that it'll get harder and harder with each year, and 22 isn't 19. I know how much you want this, Tony; I know what it means to you. You're this close to losing it all, and I know how much you respect Obadiah and his judgement, but he's not good for you, not when it comes to having your best interests at heart, not Stark Industries'. I know what you're going to say, but they're not the same thing.

I'm not going to email again. I can take the hint. The ball's in your court.
From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: June 9, 2009 03:56
Subject: Pepper I can't right now

you don't understand. fina's going to throw out all the suits we've got in the line at the moment, it'll close us down. i can't let that happen. god i can't be the stark who screwed up the company, i'll never hear the end of it. just, jesus christ, give me a break here.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: June 09, 2009 08:03
Subject: I can't believe this.

Never thought I'd see the day when I'd hear Obadiah Stane's words coming out of your mouth. Okay, this is important to you. I get it. You know I do. Just... take care of yourself. And please make sure you come see me before you get back to your proper training regime, I want to do a damage assessment. Christ, Tony, you're one stubborn bastard when you get something in your head. Driving yourself into the ground will not bring her back, you know. She wouldn't want this for you.

Pepper
From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: June 10, 2009 08:05
Subject:

God, I'm sorry. Tony, I'm sorry. I never meant to send that, I know this isn't about your Mom, or Howard--or at least not entirely. I just, I'm really worried about you. I'm sorry.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: June 11, 2009 21:21
Subject: Re:

hey, it's okay. don't worry about it. you know me best, Pep, i've always said that. by the way did i miss anything important? i've been out for a couple days.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London
From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: June 12, 2009 06:33
Subject: You've been out for a couple of days

You know what, I'm going to stop mothering you now, even though it's clear to me you need it desperately. Nothing world-ending. Go back to work, Tony. Seems like it's the only thing keeping you sane right now.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: June 18, 2009 05:01
Subject: correction
Attc: peppers badass new machine c tony stark because thats what genius means motherfuckers.pdf

Seems like it's the only thing keeping you sane right now.

no, Pep, that'd be you. i can't even swim right now in case i get an idea in the middle of it and i lose it by the time i'm out of the pool. look the deadline for proposals is november. i just have to make it to november and then we can submit and then i can crawl out of my fucking skin while i wait for those assholes to approve or reject it.

i've designed you a new workout machine, wanna see? i needed a distraction.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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pepper i am goign to fail this so hard n its gonna be all my fault nd fucking howard willve been right all along i am nothing but a screwup notworth his time and attention away from steve fucking rogers heyy so steve rogers whatever happened to that guy huh pep? if he was so fucking special, so perfect that my fucking father couldn't even pretend to be interesteddd in me on the phone once a week why isn't he the one with 5 gold medals from fuukuong beijing olympics

sory i think im a bit drunk id better delete this okay delete where's the delete key

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: June 24, 2009 09:02
Subject: Re: fcuk

Oh, Tony.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: July 24, 2009 18:24
Subject: Re: Re: fcuk
….oh god i sent that didn't i shit oh god i'm sorry Pep. hah, guess you're counting your lucky stars that you never got involved with me, huh.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: June 24, 2009 20:11
Subject: Re: Re: Re: fcuk

You're an idiot. I love you. And we didn't get involved with each other, remember? God, Tony, sometimes I want to grab you and shake you. You are Anthony Edward Stark, the genius billionaire playboy philanthropist, the guy who dragged Stark Industries kicking and screaming into the 21st Century, the man who redeveloped and redesigned every product Howard came up with until it's the very best on the market. You're amazing, and you're going to do an amazing job on those designs.

You know I'd normally prefer to avoid feeding your monstrous ego, because you do a good enough job of that on your own, but every now and again I think you need to be told that you are pretty damn incredible for a 22-year-old.

Now shut up and get back to work. And take some Advil, for the love of God.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: July 25, 2009 00:51
Subject: ow

thanks for the advil tip jesus fuck swear to god it's been six hours since i woke up my head shouldn't be hurting like this. why do you even put up with me pepper

(thanks)

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: August 13, 2009 01:12
Subject: shark skin!!!!

who knew right??

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: August 13, 2009 08:54
Subject: Re: shark skin!!!!

Oh God, Tony, please tell me you haven't finally snapped?

Pepper
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**From:** tstark@starkindustries.net  
**To:** vpotts@pottspt.com  
**Date:** August 14, 2009 03:57  
**Subject:** Re: Re: shark skin!!!!

no no i mean SHARK SKIN!! it's the perfect answer to the buoyancy issue look i'll explain later

tony

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Anthony Stark  
CEO  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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Pepper's lips are a thin white line, and her face is set in the patented "Tony Stark is such a cock-up" frown. Tony's seen it too many times on too many people's faces for it to not have its own name. Granted, it's very rare that Pepper will sport it, and hers is usually of the "God, Tony, why do you do these things to yourself" variety. Which this is, with interest.

"Don't--fuck! Don't start, Pepper, I know I screwed up," he bites out, teeth gritted against the pain.

Pepper's hands are strong, capable, merciless. "One thing I asked you to do. One thing, Tony. I asked you to call me before you tried to go back to training after such a long break. I'm glad you're back in the water, God knows it's long overdue, but you have this pesky habit of forcing yourself, and thinking that moderation is for other people who are not you," she returns, punctuating her words with hard twists of her fingers over Tony's aching muscles.

Tony could reply, but he would also really like to not get his head chewed off. Fact is, he's in the wrong here. He knows better than this; fuck it, he trusts Pepper to know what's best for his body, even more than Obie -- especially recently.

Pepper, because she's a mind reader, chooses this moment to pick up her relentless assault on Tony's excuses. "What has Obadiah had to say about this?" she demands.

Tony shrugs as best he can while lying prone on the massage table. "He's not happy with me. Says
I should have tried harder to stay in shape."

Pepper's hands pause ominously. Tony buries his face in the towel under his head. Sure enough, Mount St Pepper build-up has reached critical levels.

"What month is this, Tony?" she asks levelly. If Tony hadn't known her for close on five years, he'd never even suspect he's about to be verbally flayed.

"Uh, October? Is this a trick question?"

"October. And when was the last time you were in the pool for longer than an hour before October?"

Tony opens his mouth automatically, closes it again. The fact that he has to think about it proves Pepper's point, and so does his guilty, guilty silence, because he honestly doesn't know.

"So. You can't remember the last time you did anything resembling training, but you and Obadiah think it's a good idea to do a four-hour training session out of the blue."

"Pepper--"

"No, shut up. Shut. Up. And listen to me. Tony, I don't blame you for wanting to get back into the game, especially since you've lost almost seven months of training. I know you. More to the point, so does Obadiah. Tony, it's his responsibility as your coach to know when you're pushing yourself too hard. He should have stepped in and stopped you.

"Look, I know what he means to you. And I understand that you want to work with him; he's the last link to your father--no, shut up, I said," she snaps when Tony tries to protest. "You will hear this, because you need to hear this. Obadiah Stane is a bad swimming coach. I'm sure he is amazing as your COO, but he is not coaching material. He trusts you to know your limits, which is good, but not good for you. Obadiah Stane is a bad swimming coach. I'm sure he is amazing as your COO, but he is not coaching material. He trusts you to know your limits, which is good, but not good for you, for Tony Stark who doesn't know the meaning of the word. He's letting you drive yourself to serious injury.

"I didn't say anything before, because this partnership was working at the start. He helped you focus your energy into the sport. But this isn't what you need any longer. He's done all he can for you, Tony. It's time he let someone else take over, someone with more experience than just swimming. If you want to make it to the next Olympics, things have to change."

Tony lies there in sullen silence, words teeming inside his head, on the tip of his tongue; it leaves him sweating to keep most of them back, the defensive tirades, the accusations. Because Pepper? Pepper deserves none of those, not for being a good friend, and not for doing the job Tony hired her to do.

"I can't, Pepper," he says at last, and even he can hear the defeat in his voice. "Obie has stood by me when no one else would, in the boardroom and out of it. I owe it to him."

"You don't," Pepper says gently, starting to work on his sore neck muscles. "You don't owe him anything, Tony. Any decent human being would have done the same thing, and more. It's not that Obie doesn't want the best for you; I just don't think his 'best' and your 'best' match anymore."

She doesn't speak again for the remainder of the session, and neither does Tony.
"Where is he?" Pepper demands, blasting through the doors to the pool and down the length of it. Tony is sprawled on the tiles at the far end, fighting to breathe through the pain. Obie is sitting by his side, holding his shoulders down so he doesn't jostle whatever injury he's sustained now.

"Sorry to call you out on Christmas." Tony wheezes when she reaches him and slides to her knees, face frantic with worry.

"What?" she says, distracted, while her eyes assess him from top to bottom. Tony's wearing one of the new line of Stark swimsuits, above the knee as per regulation, bare from the waist up. It makes it easier to diagnose him, he supposes. He can't turn his head, can't even look at his shoulder; there's a line of fire down his neck and back right now, and Tony knows his anatomy. He knows this is bad.

"Here, Obadiah, let up. I need to touch him."

Obie sits back obediently. His face is pale, only confirming Tony's worst fears. Pepper's hands are gentle when they trace his skin, but even the slightest of pressure makes Tony want to scream.

"I need to turn you on your back. I'm pretty sure you've pulled your trapezius, but I need to assess how bad the injury is."

"Pulled trapezius?" Obie says, sounding much calmer. "That's not so bad."

"Not so bad?!" Tony bites out through clenched teeth. He can barely breathe right now from the pain.

"Well, I mean, it sucks, but you'll bounce back in no time."

Pepper presses down, and Tony yelps, feeling the sting of tears in his eyes.

"I think there might be a slight tear. We're going to have to do an MRI."

"Fuck," Tony breathes. He *hates* MRIs. He doesn't mind the machinery or the noise overmuch; it's the staying completely still that makes him itch to move, hand, finger, anything. Last time he'd had to get one, his right hand had cramped on the panic button they'd pushed in it before wheeling him in, from the forced immobility. It had ached for hours afterwards.

Pepper hums sympathetically, turning him on his back again. Now Tony can see her glaring at Obie, who looks vastly cheered up.

"You'll be all right, kiddo. And you can get some more hours in at the workshop while you heal, so it's a win-win, yes? I can smuggle you the testing results while you're at the hospital."

"It's going to set back his training for the London 2012 even more," Pepper reproaches flatly.

Obie shrugs, unconcerned. "There's always Rio in 2016. You like Rio, don't you, Tony?"

This isn't the first time in his life that Tony has wanted to cry. He chomps down on it, pushes it back and back until it's buried under several layers of false serenity.

It is the first time in his life, however, that the source of his unhappiness is Obie. Suddenly his trapezius doesn't hurt half as badly as the pain in his chest.

Pepper looks down at him, and Tony can see the clash of fury and kindness in her eyes. She's far
too classy to say 'I told you so'; she doesn't need to. Tony gets the message loud and clear. He sighs. After the MRI, then. There's no point breaking up his and Obie's relationship before he can get his hands on the data from Stark Industries that Obie promised him--

It's that moment when Tony truly understands what Pepper has been trying to tell him -- he's so attached to Obie not just because of his link to Howard and his mother, but also because Obie is an enabler. He enables Tony's worst habits, his workaholism, his inability to take care of himself, keep himself in prime condition. Food shakes aren't going to cut it this time.

God but Tony hates being an adult.

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He lies in the hospital bed after the tests, grateful that Stark Industries' regular donations have cut the waiting list for the MRI for him, because he'd have gone insane having to fake patience until it was his turn. Middle-of-the-night scanning at least bypasses the drag of medication-induced fuzziness.

Painkillers are good for another thing, at least; they dull the ache in his chest at the memory of the look on Obie's face when Tony had told him their coach-swimmer relationship was over. Obie had been utterly shocked. He'd never even seen it coming. He'd tried to argue with Tony, tried to tell him he didn't know what was best for him; tried to accuse Pepper of meddling. Tony never thought he'd be grateful for the realisation of the day before, of how little weight Obie put on Tony's personal goals and aspirations, but it was the only thing that had kept him from folding.

Obie had stormed off, furious, issuing dire threats and warning Tony that his swimming career was over, because no other coach worth his salt would put up with his shit. Right now, Tony is seriously considering the possibility that Obie was right -- who would choose to put up with him, six figure salary notwithstanding? No one knows better than Tony that money can't buy you everything, no matter what he tries to pretend.

Pepper's soft voice pulls him from his maudlin thoughts.

"Are you brooding?" she asks, quietly closing the door.

"No," Tony says, and winces at how defensive it comes out.

Pepper sighs, comes closer and sits on the edge of the hospital bed. She holds up the MRI scans, turns on the light at the bedside table and angles the lightbulb to shine behind the film.

"You have a minor tear right here," she says, pointing at the lighter thread through the muscle. "It's going to need serious downtime, Tony. At least a week, two at best, without any strain placed on it."

This isn't news to Tony; the doctor had told him all this when the scans were still cooling on the computer screen. Tony appreciates Pepper taking the time to repeat it, though. He thinks maybe it's starting to sink in. More delays. More loss of form. More chances of never regaining it again.

"Am I done, Pepper?" he asks softly. He doesn't want to hear it, rebels against it, but he still needs her to say it if that's what this is.
Pepper looks at him blankly for a moment, and Tony braces himself for the worst before realising she doesn't know what he's talking about.

"With swimming, I mean. Should I just stop? Is there any point if I can't make the 2012 Olympics? By 2016 I'll be twenty-nine. I'll never be able to keep the shape I need to be in."

Pepper's expression clears, and she shakes her head lightly. "You're not done, Tony. You can bounce back from this. But--" she stops, hesitating. Tony can see the question in her eyes.

"It's over. With Obie, I mean. I told him this afternoon. I hope you know that I expect you to find me another coach now, Potts, after making me fire the only person who'd take the job."

Pepper levels him a glare of such affront that Tony snickers a little, careful not to jostle his shoulders. "I beg your pardon?" she says, such magnificent ice in her voice that she could freeze a whole gallon of margaritas.

He waves his hand weakly, because he hasn't the words right now. She knows what he means.

She shifts a little, straightens her spine, like she's preparing for battle. It dawns on Tony that she might well have an ace up her stylishly cut sleeve.

"I may have someone in mind," she admits, and Tony grins, feeling for the first time that there might still be light at the end of the tunnel.

"Tell me?"

"His name is Yinsen," Pepper starts, and Tony must have swallowed the wrong way because he's choking on his own spit.

"Yinsen?!" he demands, as much as he can with his voice half-lost to rasping. "The man's an urban legend. He doesn't exist, Pepper."

Pepper folds her hands primly in her lap, gives him a Look. "Have you even stopped to wonder where Jarvis has been for the past couple of months?" she asks, and Tony stops, blindsided. He hadn't. Not once. He is a terrible, terrible friend.

"I thought he was busy with personal matters. That's what he said. I thought he was letting me work."

Pepper sighs. "Oh, Tony," she says, and Tony ducks his head and avoids her eyes. She always manages to make him feel like a naughty five-year-old despite being no more than sixteen months older than him. "He's on his way back now, I think--yeah, his plane ought to be landing any minute. Yinsen is a real person, legend and all. And he's agreed to meet with you, at least."

"Did you send Jarvis to track him down?" Tony asks, tone thick with disbelief.

Pepper lifts an eyebrow. Tony snorts, because yeah, you don't 'send' Jarvis to do anything. "He worries about you, Tony, as much as I do."

Tony ducks his head again, cheeks heating. He knows they do. It's just... sometimes it's difficult to believe it, or understand why.

"Crap," he sighs. "He'll never agree to take me on."

"Don't count your chicks," Pepper cautions archly.
Tony, once Pepper has kissed his cheek and left for the night, dares to let himself believe this is really happening. To be coached by Yinsen himself... Tony might actually stand a chance at getting there. Maybe even gaining on Howard. It's not why he does this--well. Okay, not *entirely* why he does this. It's something to work towards, however. He'll never be his father; but for the first time since his mother's death, Tony is kind of all right with that.

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They let him go home from the hospital the next day, pumped full of ibuprofen and with strict instructions to comply with. Tony is seriously glad that Jarvis is back, because he can't do this by himself, especially the application of ice every damn hour, and heat pads the day after.

The driver keeps sending him worried looks in the rearview mirror. Tony focuses, as much as he can with the haze of drugs still in his system, and puts a name to the concerned blue eyes. "Happy, right? Don't worry, kid, I'm not gonna croak it in the back seat. I don't look that bad, do I?"

He's only half-joking -- he hasn't so much as looked at his reflection since well before he jumped in the pool. For all he knows, he looks like death warmed up. To his surprise, the driver neither stutters, nor gets flustered. This is rare enough that Tony sits up and takes notice -- metaphorically. "Who're you calling 'kid', sir? I'm three years older than you." Happy doesn't sound insulted; if anything, he sounds amused.

"Huh," Tony says, narrowing his eyes. "And how long have you been working at Stark Industries?"

*That* gets Happy flustered. He's the most interesting person Tony's come across for ages. "Since January 1st, 2004," he says quietly, and suddenly it clicks for Tony, where he'd first seen Happy. He'd been the driver of the limo that had taken Tony to Howard's funeral six years ago almost to the day. Happy throws him a look in the mirror that is surprisingly devoid of curiosity or pity -- manages instead to hold nothing but kindness. Damn, Tony likes the guy.

"Six years dedicated service without running away screaming. Happy, you deserve a promotion. I hereby appoint you my personal driver, effective immediately. See HR for the paperwork, or tell me now if you'd rather not be promoted at all -- I am a very demanding boss, I keep weird hours, and I have it on good authority that I am a goddamn handful--"

"I'll take the job," Happy snaps through a big grin on his mouth, talking right over him. Tony *likes* him.

At any rate, it's an excellent distraction from the insistent ache in his neck and back that won't abate no matter how Tony rotates and fidgets.

"Should I stop, Mr Stark?" Happy wants to know, foot already off the gas by the way the car slows. They're almost at the mansion, though; from the bottom of the series of turns that takes the traveller up to the hilltop, Tony can see an unfamiliar, nondescript gray car in the driveway -- it looks like a rental. Adrenaline spikes when he realises who that must be.

"No, no, for the love of god keep going, you know what, step on it."
The car shoots forward, and Tony grabs the door handle to minimise the jostling. Happy takes the turns much smoother than Tony normally bothers with; it dawns on Tony that Happy is a pro through and through. It's nice to be proven right occasionally.

The car pulls up; before Tony can embarrass himself by falling out of it, Happy's there, bracing his elbow and deftly stopping him from faceplanting on the asphalt.

"Good man," Tony wheezes, trying to catch his breath. His heart feels like it's going to burst out of his chest. Could this really be happening?

As if in answer, the door opens and Jarvis steps out on the front porch, looking tall and tanned and like the best thing Tony's seen in ages.

"Welcome home, sir," Jarvis says, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I see you are persisting in your quest to give everyone you know a heart attack."

"You charmer," Tony says, throwing him a wink. "I hear you brought me back a present from your time swanning off to foreign parts."

Jarvis gives him an unimpressed look, obviously biting back a smart retort. Tony, high off the good drugs, just grins goofily at him. "Good to see you, buddy," he says, because it is, really good. Sometimes he wishes Jarvis was the least bit interested in him; but he's been down that road before, and they had somehow survived Tony's boyish, inexperienced, laughable attempts at seduction. Tony, a tinkerer by nature, has long accepted that this is one thing better off without his interference.

"It is good to see you mostly unharmed, too, sir. Mr Yinsen is waiting for you by the pool."

Not for the first time, Tony considers running hard in the other direction, because he's not sure he can survive the disdain of such a legend, and he knows full well that his recent choices leave a lot to be desired.

He doesn't jump when he feels Jarvis' hand land on his uninjured shoulder, but it's a close call. "It'll be fine, Tony," Jarvis says, his smooth, familiar voice soothing Tony's ragged nerves.

"You don't know that," Tony grumbles. Jarvis is the one person in the whole world around whom Tony can let himself feel doubt, question the outcome of someone meeting him for the first time.

"You are a dedicated athlete, the pinnacle of this country's swimming legacy. Of course you'll do fine."

Tony ducks his head, blushing a little.

"Just don't bollocks this up," Jarvis adds, clapping his shoulder again and completely ignoring Tony's justifiably affronted "Hey!"

The man pacing pensively down one side of the pool is not particularly tall. He's thin, skinny almost, but his arms look muscled and toned under the fitted sweater he's wearing. His back is ramrod-straight; when he turns, it's snappy, practiced, almost military in its precision. There are wire-frame glasses perched on his long, hooked nose; the eyes behind them are a piercing gray that seems to reach through to Tony's very core, tearing down all his barriers like they're made of tissue paper.

"Mr Yinsen," Tony forces past his stone-dry throat, flustered in a way he hasn't felt in years. He offers his hand, winces a little when he overextends his reach and pulls at his sore muscles. "It's an
honor to meet you, sir."

"Just Yinsen," says Yinsen mildly, taking his hand. His grip is careful, his eyes assessing. Tony doesn't think he can pull a single thing over this man. "Pleasure to meet you as well." He has a soft accent, nothing jarring enough to make a person wonder where he's from, but present nonetheless; it gives his voice a pleasant lilt.

Yinsen drops Tony's hand; Tony fidgets, doesn't know what to do with it. "Uh, you wanna--sorry, I'm a bit fuzzy from the drugs, the drugs from the hospital I mean, I don't do drugs, drugs are bad--uh, sorry, I mean, would you like to go sit down somewhere?" He's babbling; he wishes Jarvis, or Pepper, or Rhodey, or hell, even Happy, were here to slap a hand over his mouth to stop him from making an idiot of himself.

Yinsen nods graciously, and follows Tony towards a cluster of seats, a sofa and two armchairs around a coffee table in one corner of the extension to the mansion that houses the Olympic-sized swimming pool. Tony has taken to working there of recent, jogging over to jot down a note if an idea strikes him while he's training.

"Mr Stark," Yinsen starts, once they are seated. Tony, apparently incapable of acting mature in the face of such a legendary figure, immediately interrupts.

"Tony, please."

Not a twitch ripples Yinsen's face; still, Tony's got the sudden impression that he has just planted his foot squarely in his own mouth.

"Stark," Yinsen says, and this time Tony doesn't dare interrupt. "I am not here to be your friend. I am not here to coddle you, or to pander to your precocious genius. I am not here for you to waste both our time. I am here, will be here if we agree to work together, solely to help you achieve the objective you have set for yourself. If you truly want to get to the next Olympic games, are prepared to put in the work that will be required to prepare you at this late stage of the game, then yes. We will do very well together. If not, tell me now, and we part without recriminations. Are we in agreement?"

Tony swallows dryly. He feels like he's at the verge of something incredible, teetering on the edge. This, here and now, will decide the rest of his professional swimming career, he knows it in his bones. There's only one answer he can give this man.

"Yes. Yes, we are in agreement. I want this. I want it enough to do anything, whatever it takes. If you can help me get there, I will cover you in gold."

Yinsen's lips twitch. "That will not be necessary. I will have your word, however. My methods are not strictly orthodox, and of course we will tailor them until they work for you, but you will agree to comply with and defer all matters of training and shape to my judgement."

Anxiety rises in Tony's chest, threatening to drown him. He has never worked like this with anyone before, not even Jarvis or Pepper, least of all with Obie. He has always exercised a flagrant disregard of other people's opinions if they clashed with his own. To essentially transfer all decision-making power into the hands of one man... It's terrifying.

He looks at Yinsen, sitting there, perfectly calm and non-threatening, and he isn't sure he can do this thing.

On the other hand...
"But if I disagree with something, we can talk about it, right? I mean, I can't promise that I won't be a pain in your ass, but I do promise to listen and not jump the start and, yes, okay, defer to your judgement as much as I can."

Yinsen sighs; for a long, utterly terrifying second, Tony's sure he's blown it spectacularly. But then Yinsen's mouth twitches, and he gives Tony a wry smile. "From you, Stark, that's as good as a binding contract. Very well. I will work with you, until such a time as we agree to terminate our involvement."

Tony can barely process this. He has a new coach, and it's goddamn Yinsen, the guy who ran in direct competition with Howard and beat him at least half of the time, if the stories are to be believed -- and looking at him now, Tony rather thinks they are. The grin that takes over threatens to split his face in half. What do you know? He isn't such a total screw-up after all.

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He's nearing the middle of his cooldown when he hears voices getting closer, muffled through water rushing over his cap and his ears. He keeps powering forward, because he's tired, it's been a long session and he's got an appointment with Pepper besides. Sore muscles protest when he pushes off the wall of the pool and turns, not bothering to resurface for far longer than the fifteen meters allowed.

"...sure I see what all the fuss..." he hears when he breaks for breath; he turns his head a bit more than he ought to, catches a glimpse of a tall African-American man, half of whose face is obscured by shadow and something black -- a patch of fabric?

Tony's never seen him before in his life, but Yinsen sure looks like he knows the guy -- there's something comfortable, at ease with the way he stands, head tilted towards the stranger's. Oh god, they're going to make him be social, aren't they? Damn it, he's so not in the mood for this.

Once he's completed the 200m, he seriously considers not coming out of the pool at all, swimming another 200 just to make a point, but it seems childish even to him, and pettiness is all well and good, but he's exhausted and he wants Pepper's strong, capable hands on him, unknotting tension from his neck and shoulders. So he reaches the end of the pool and yanks himself out of the water, hopping to his feet with practiced ease.

Before he can make a show of looking for his towel, Yinsen tosses it at him, glasses gleaming in the bright overhead lights.

"Tony, I want you to meet someone. I'm sorry it's unscheduled, but I've been trying to organise a meeting with Mr Fury for some time now, and he just had a cancellation. Nick, Tony Stark. Tony, Nick Fury."

Tony looks at the man properly for the first time, only to find himself on the receiving end of the most calculating look he has ever experienced, for all that it only comes out of one eye -- Fury's other eye is hidden behind a neat black patch, a cicatrix of scars radiating from the center. Tony fights to not let the man's obvious evaluation throw him -- but fuck, it does, a little. He sniffs, trying to hide his discomfort, and nods at him, offering a hand. Fury stares at it before reaching forward. His grip is tight, strong -- trustworthy, his old man would have no doubt said.
"I'd say it's a pleasure to meet you, but this is the first I've heard of you," Tony says, because, well. It's what he does, isn't it.

Fury, instead of bristling or putting on a show, smirks. "That's your loss, Mr Stark. Lucky for you, here I am now, and I have a proposition for you. I'd suggest you sit down and listen up. This isn't something you're likely to get a lot in your life."

"Huh," Tony says, raising an eyebrow. "Heard that a few times. Can't say any of them have lived up to the big talk."

"As you'll soon find out, Stark, I'm different. I'm here to talk to you about the US Olympics Swimming team."

Tony blinks, takes a second look at the man. Tall, yes, but also taut, muscled, with the long lines of a seasoned backstroker. Tony wonders briefly whether he and Howard knew each other, because Fury looks old enough to have overlapped with the legend. Tony's not going to ask, though.

He raises a single eyebrow at Yinsen: who is this guy? Yinsen glares back, the look he seems to have patented around Tony, half-exasperation, half-irritation, a pinch of reluctant amusement, so Tony knows he's not in too much trouble.

"Sit down and hear him out, Tony," he says on a sigh. Tony shrugs and sits.

"I hope you called Pepper," he says, running the towel over his chest and down his legs, shaking off the worst of the water. He'd planned to go straight to the massage table, so there aren't any clothes lying around like usual. He shrugs and throws the towel over one of the wicker chairs, flops down on top of it. "Go on, then. You have my undivided attention for the next thirty seconds."

Fury tilts his head and levels him a look out of that one eye that, fuck if it doesn't make Tony's blood run cold. He amends Fury's file in his head to include, "Could probably kill me with his pinkie. Establish how far can push him before they're fishing my body parts out of the pool."

"So. The Olympics team. I do have more experience than most, that is true. Was there something in particular you wanted my expertise on?"

Fury looks like he'd be choking on something if he were a lesser man. And then, completely out of the blue, he grins. It's not a nice grin. Puts Tony rather in mind of hammerhead sharks, what with the one-eyed pirate thing.

"And what makes you think I'll let you on my team?"

Tony goggles at him. "I'm going to qualify," he blurts, which he hates, because he never gets caught wrong-footed, hasn't for a very, very long time. The familiar sting of rejection, ridicule, the flare of hurt, fuck. Tony had promised that kid from a decade ago that they'd never have to go through anything like that again.


"You have a shot," Fury concedes at last, throwing Yinsen a short look nevertheless loaded with meaning. "You've been making an effort the past ten months. But it's not enough. How long has it been since you trained with Rhodes?"

Tony glares at Yinsen, feeling oddly betrayed. Trust is a foreign emotion that Tony has long ago given up on mastering, but he still feels like he's been backstabbed by this guy, who's supposed to be his coach, have his back. Yinsen looks back measuredly, and doesn't rise to the accusations
Tony knows are too obvious in his eyes.

"It's not enough, Stark. Far from it. You're working on it, but in the last week you've taken two half-day breaks from training to attend to matters at Stark Industries. Which I can understand; god knows Howard did it enough times," he adds, ignoring Tony's instinctive flinch that he hasn't quite managed to train himself out of. "But if you want in on my team, you need to step it up. Qualifying times have been dropping like flies for the past ten months. You're barely making it as you are now.

"Look, I'll be honest. I want you on my team. You're a loose cannon, but you are ridiculously fast when you put your mind to it, and the US team hasn't won a freestyle relay for close to a decade. I've got my eye on that win, and I need you to get it. What I'm offering you is a spot at the Colorado Springs facility. You'll be training with several other swimmers to up your pace and improve your overall performance -- and before you refuse, because I can see you're thinking of making that stupid snap-second decision, you might want to consider the fact that Rhodes has already agreed to take the spot I offered him. This is a one-time offer only. I want you on my team, but I'm not gonna put up with indecisive bullshit. Make up your mind and stick to it. Yinsen has my number. Call me in three days, or lose the spot."

With that Fury rises, throws him another one of those horrifyingly penetrating looks, nods at Yinsen and stalks out. Tony sits there for a moment, shell-shocked, wondering what the fuck just happened.

In the end, he gives up and asks Yinsen, because hell, he's never been very good at this people shit.

Yinsen hums, purses his lips, like he's looking for the right words. "I think you just got offered your deepest wish on a platter, Tony, what did you think just happened? If anyone can push you to beat Howard's record, it's Fury."

"He mentioned Howard. How did they know each other?"

"Fury was Howard's protege on the US 1988 Swimming team. Won a bunch of gold medals at Seoul, before busting his back in a car crash. It also--well," Yinsen trails off, waving a finger in the vicinity of his left eye. Tony gets the drift. "Howard put him in charge of coaching while he was recovering, and Fury took such a shine to it that he decided against competing in further Olympics, and went into it full-time. He took a year out to work with Howard in England before coming back here."

Tony digests this, running his hands through his damp hair that's getting too long again. "So he's good, then."

Yinsen nods, looking as serious as he gets. Tony mirrors him, bobbing his head while he thinks. "Soooo, you think I ought to go, don't you."

"Tony, I like working with you," he says at last, which comes as a bit of a surprise to Tony, because he always thought Yinsen just tolerated him, mostly. "I will keep working with you, if that is what you want. But Fury? I think Fury understands who you are, where you are headed, on a deeper level than I can. And I know he will do right by you. I would not have contacted him at all otherwise. But this is your decision. No one else can make it for you.

"Have a think. Sleep on it. Talk to Pepper and Jarvis. Talk to Rhodes. See what they've got to say, and then make your choice."
It's sound advice, Tony knows, watching Yinsen's back as he walks away. He's already late for the appointment with Pepper, but all he can do is sit in the silence of the poolhouse, feeling droplets of water drying on his forearms, and stare into the distance. What a sight Fury and Howard must have made, working together, Howard the very image of old-school class, and Fury the quintessential badass even before the loss of his eye. Tony can picture it in his head; it's compelling.

"Tony?" Pepper's voice floats from the door; she hesitates, unlike the last time she'd had to barge in and patch him up.

"In here, Pep."

Her heels clack over the mosaic walkway, approaching down the length of the pool. "Are you okay? I got a phone call a few minutes ago from a Phil Coulson, saying I should find you? What's going on? Who's Phil Coulson?"

Tony returns her baffled look. "Absolutely no idea. Did he say anything else?"

"He said you were in a meeting with Coach Fury?"

Ah. "Must be one of Fury's lackeys, then."

"Who's Fury?" Pepper asks patiently, worry lines fading from her face when she's had the chance to see for herself that Tony's perfectly fine and not in need of assistance, thanks very much. Except he is. Oh, hell.

He tells her everything, every last detail, even that bit about class and badassery. Pepper shoots him a quelling look at that part, but she listens to the whole sorry tale without interrupting, which is actually making Tony a bit unsettled, because that's certainly never happened before.

When he's done, all talked out (which, again, he'd never have thought it would happen), Pepper just looks at him, this calm, peaceful look on her face. That's about the time that Tony realises not so much what he's been saying as the way he's been saying it.

"Oh, fuck," he groans, rubbing the heels of his hands over his eyes, digging in until he sees stars. "I'm gonna go, aren't I?"

"Yes, Tony," Pepper says, amused and indulgent. She's not frowning, or looking tense, so Tony figures he's managed to make the right choice by himself for once.

"I'm going to die of boredom," he moans, letting his head hang to rest on the back of the wicker chair and glaring at the ceiling. "I'm going to have to set up a server connection so I can get all the files I'm gonna need to work on. Fuck, I'm going to have to move to Colorado! What the hell's in Colorado that they had to base an entire facility there?? Oh my god, what if it's in the middle of the desert?"

Pepper snorts. "You're being ridiculous. You're talking about a $23.8 million facility. It's not going to be in the desert, but it is going to be half a country away from Stark Industries, which I happen to think is a good thing. You need to focus your efforts if you want to get to where you're aiming. Nothing's gonna happen to the company if you're physically away from the place for a year and a half; it's not like you'll suddenly stop working, everyone knows that full well. Also, you represent the core of the SI Marketing strategy, I know you know that. The company depends on you doing as well as possible."

"No pressure, then," Tony sighs, closing his eyes. A moment later, he feels Pepper's smaller hand
curl against his, thumb running over the back of his knuckles.

"You'll be okay, Tony. Who knows, maybe you'll make some friends while you're there?"

Tony scoffs at that, because he is many things, but one thing he isn't, is an easy guy to like. He is pretty much the polar opposite of that, which is okay, he made it that way himself, easier than letting himself hope too much, open himself up for things that have the power to break him. He's better off like this, it's not the first time he's reached this conclusion. Still, the thought is... nice, if bittersweet, because while a very small part of him might want it, the bigger part of him is a realist, and it knows the odds of it happening are slim to none.

"I'm not really a team player," he says, and if it comes out a little bitter, well. It's only Pepper, who knows what he's thinking better than he does.

"Oh, Tony," Pepper says gently, squeezing his hand. "You don't give yourself enough credit."

"That's not what you usually say," he teases, because god, change of topic right now, please and thank you. He's not equipped for dealing with this kind of complex emotions. Besides, it's true.

Pepper purses her lips disapprovingly, and Tony grins for what feels like the first time in hours. God, he doesn't know what he'd do without her. They're going to make AT&T so much money in the next year.

"Colorado Springs," he sighs mournfully to himself. He can tell already it's going to be terrible -- he's going to have to conform to a schedule, for god's sake, this is all kinds of awful.

Still. If it gets him the medals, he'll put up with a multitude of sins against his person. After all, he's going to spend the next year of his life training anyway, no matter where he picks to do it. It's not like going to Colorado is going to change anything in the grand scheme of things.

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Colorado Springs isn't quite the nightmare facility from hell that Tony was so fond of imagining. In fact, it's a cheery place, full of sunshine and people and determination. It's teeming with activity when he arrives, one too-early morning a week into January. It's around ten o'clock, and there are people running around everywhere, a lot of them with shooting rifles but mainly men and women in navy shirts and khaki pants, access badges hanging on straps around their necks.

Happy hurries around the car to help him out from around the variety of bags that wouldn't fit in the trunk and Tony had flat-out refused to leave behind. Several tumble out anyway when Tony crawls his way out, and Happy says nothing, just pushes them back in the car and slams the door on them to trap them inside like they're some many-armed monster out to get him.

"I hope you get a big room, boss, otherwise you'll have to invent a new rotating storage unit to house all this," he says, eyeing the pile through the tinted windows.

"You've been watching Wall-E again, haven't you," Tony says absentmindedly, looking around and trying to decide where to start. He hasn't the first clue where he's supposed to go from here -- he'd called Fury two days ago, sick of overthinking the whole thing, and thrown his lot in with the rest of the US Swimming team, to which Fury had responded by telling him to pack up and haul ass to Colorado Springs yesterday. The fact that it's taken Tony two days to pack isn't something he
wants to think about too closely -- he'd never thought he'd need this many things, or that he'd even want this level of connection to a life he's still not sure is really his.

He's wondering which direction to stride purposefully to (because that's the secret to too many things in life -- look like you know where you're going and you've won already), when he notices a man striding in their direction. He's wearing a damn suit, which is extremely odd amidst the other uniforms around the place. He looks like a Fed in his shirt and tie and shiny, shiny shoes, inconspicuous and unassuming. It actually takes Tony aback to find that when he reaches them, he's half a head taller than him.

"Tony Stark, I presume," the man says mildly, a faint smile on his mouth. Tony distrusts that smile deeply -- Pepper has one just like it, and when it appears on her face Tony knows he's in so much trouble already.

"Yeah," he answers cautiously. Behind him, Happy takes a step forward, flanking his right wing. The man's eyes flicker to Happy and away, and Tony's never seen anyone look so unimpressed in his life. "Phil Coulson," he introduces himself; the name joggs Tony's memory -- he'd last heard it from Pepper's lips.

"Ah. Fury's lackey," he says, and wow, he was wrong before, because Coulson manages to convey a whole new level of unimpressed just by lifting an eyebrow.

"If it helps you sleep at night. I'm the US Swimming team assistant coach, and you are late for practice. Leave all your bags here, they'll be collected from the car. Grab your training gear and come with me."

Tonny -- goggles at him, yes, no other word to describe it. "My training gear is in at least five separate bags. You can't be serious."

Coulson sighs like the disappointment of the whole world rests on his shoulders. "Mr Stark, I am always serious. Now, can you act like a responsible adult or will I have to give you orders like an unruly child?"

At his shoulder, Happy snorts, covering it immediately with a cough when Tony turns to glare at him. There's a challenge in Coulson's eyes when Tony looks back at him; suddenly, it dawns on Tony what this is.

"If you wanted to test my resolve, you could have just asked," he grumbles, waving at Happy to unlock the trunk. Despite what he said, he knows exactly where his gear is, and how to get to it.

"Then it wouldn't be testing, would it," Coulson says, but there's something in his voice that is different, something like approval. "Let's go, Mr Stark."

"Good god, stop calling me that," Tony mutters, head buried in one of his cases stuffed with electronics to dig out his goggles.

Coulson doesn't dignify that with an answer, just waits patiently until Tony's thrown his gear together and shoulders the holdall; then he turns and strides away, leaving Tony to scramble behind him. They make their way through the complex, towards a huge building that can't really house anything but the pools. As soon as he's through the door, the distinctive smell of water and chemicals confirms his suspicions. There are plenty of windows along the walls, letting in the late morning light and making the space glow with glinting reflections off the water; there are several swimmers going at it, leaving foam in their wakes. Tony, having been outside a pool for the three
days it's taken to pack up and get here, itches to jump in, so much that he doesn't even protest a little when Coulson gives him directions to the changing rooms.

He gets ready in record time, jogging to warm up, stretching his upper body as he goes, emerging from the long corridor to see Coulson deep in conversation with another guy, wet from the pool and wearing what look like vintage trunks at least five years old. Tony scowls, offended that the management is letting this travesty go on and determined to do something about it as soon as he can get Marketing on the phone. One thing he can't deny, though -- those trunks fit deliciously over the guy's molded ass and strong thighs, showcasing the long planes of his back. Tony follows a trickle of water down from the guy's dark hair standing up in wet, ruffled spikes, over his broad shoulders, down the valley of his spine, dividing into two at the edge of the trapezius and trailing into the right dimple at the small of his back. He licks his lips, lets a smirk escape. He'd forgotten what it's like to have other swimmers around apart from Rhodey, to train with other people he doesn't immediately know -- not that he ever has, because he's been on his own from the start, just him and the enormous pool and Jarvis to count the time.

Coulson looks up as he approaches, and the guy turns, fixing pale blue eyes on Tony. His pouty lips shape themselves around words Tony can't yet hear, and they lift at one corner at Coulson's reply. The guy makes a show of eyeing him up and down as Tony reaches them, mouth pursing. "So you're Stark," he says, more of a statement than a question.

"Guilty," Tony says, smirking. "I see my reputation precedes me."

For some reason the guy seems to find that funny, grinning full-out as he says, "I like you. You're everything and nothing like your old man."

Normally, Tony would be considering the odds of getting hit back right about now. It comes as a bit of a shock to realise that he doesn't actually want to punch this particular guy's lights out. Could be the dancing light in his eyes, or it could be the way his smirk is tinged with bitterness round the edges, but Tony gets the impression that this guy was not Howard's biggest fan.

"I take it you knew my father?"

"Oh yeah," the guy drawls, confirming Tony's suspicions. Then he shoves his hand out, offering it to Tony. "Bucky Barnes. I trained with Howard Stark a long time ago."

Tony eyes him back; he'll be damned if the guy's any older than him, but maybe he was one of the debatably lucky kids who got Howard's undivided attention early on.

"In England," Barnes clarifies when he sees Tony's dubious expression. Suddenly things become much clearer.

"You're the Bucky Barnes?" Tony blurts, unable to stop the surprise from leaking out as he takes his hand. "Dad used to say you had the best upstroke on any guy he'd ever seen."

Barnes smirks a little with the same hint of unhappiness as before, grip firm while he shakes Tony's hand and lets go. "I'm sure I'm flattered," he deadpans. "Coming from the old bastard that's like a standing round of applause. No offence or anything."

Oh, Tony likes him. "None taken," he says cheerfully. "Hey, remember how his eyebrow pencil used to run when he'd been in the water too long? Used to be, like, an inch over his actual eyebrows?"

Barnes lets out a bark of laughter, clapping Tony's bare arm. "Yeah, oh my god, do I ever. He used
to try to make me do it, too. Don't think he liked me too well after I told him where to shove it.

Tony joins in the laughter, a curious lightness unfolding in his chest as he bumps the knuckles Barnes offers him without the slightest hesitation. For the first time in his life, he doesn't feel so alone.

Coulson is observing them with a mild expression; Tony's only just met the man, so he doesn't know if his take on him is on target yet, but he thinks Coulson's amused behind that mask of his. The way Barnes stands loose and easy at his side confirms the impression.

"If you're quite done, gentlemen, I'd like to put Stark through his paces. Barnes, partner him, won't you? Rhodes is at physical right now, and I don't want to wait."

Tony turns to look at Barnes, who is eyeing him up again, a clear challenge in his gaze. The grin that stretches his mouth feels wild, a little reckless, a lot excited.

"Hell yeah," he says, winking at Barnes. "Try to keep up."

Then he turns and jumps in the pool, laughing madly at the mock-enraged sound Barnes makes as he throws himself after him. This thing might not be such a bad idea after all.

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Fury doesn't make an appearance for the next couple of weeks, and Tony gets used to Coulson calling the shots, settles down to the serious business of testing his newfound boundaries. He, Barnes and Rhodey train together, eat together, alternate dryland and the gym and basically turn every single thing into a competition. When Coulson doesn't find it necessary to chew them out for it, it becomes as much a part of their routine as lunch, or massage. It's a bit hard to train when there's three of them, but Barnes looks smug every time Tony mentions it, and Coulson remains frustratingly tight-lipped. Tony's sure there's something going on, and frankly it's driving him up the wall that he can't work out what. It's beyond clear to him that they need another teammate, and that the powers that be are obviously on that. He doesn't like the spike of trepidation in his gut when he wonders what they aren't telling him. What could it possibly be that they'd try to keep it a secret? Tony has no arch-enemies on the swimming circuit, none that he considers arch-enemies anyway -- do people even still have them these days? Still, there's something he's not being told, and he doesn't like it one damn bit.

Consequently, because this is his life, it has to be the very moment when he is perfectly, blissfully happy with the world and the way things are going, that everything goes to shit.

"Hey," Bucky yells when Tony drafts off of his wake, passing him easily. Sure, it's an asshole move, but it's the end of another gruelling practice, and Tony's been so good lately, and things have been way too serious for the past couple of days, what with Rhodey pulling a muscle and having to sit training out for the rest of the week. Truth is, Tony's a little spooked by the blast from the past, and he'd like nothing better than a bit of a tussle, to get dunked a few times, to return the favour, just so his damn chest will stop feeling so tight, knowing the kind of pain Rhodey's in right now, knowing that this can happen to any of them at a moment's notice. So yeah, he fucking cheats, sue him. It's the fucking cooldown.

Bucky catches up to him, closes a hand around his ankle and tugs, dragging him under the water
and springing past. Tony resurfaces, spluttering and giggling madly, throwing himself in Bucky's wake to tickle his feet. Bucky yelps, spins in the water and kicks out, catching Tony in the shoulder, nowhere near hard enough to injure but yeah, it drives a whoomp of air from Tony's lungs, most of which comes out in a rush of bubbles as his mouth dips under the water. Bucky is laughing, eyes dancing, as he twists in the water and races him for the edge of the pool, technique terribly sloppy but still effective enough that he's pulling away, and Tony sets his face in a mock-severe frown, rushes after him. Bucky wins, of course, he was way closer, but Tony doesn't mind one bit. He's about to tackle him again, keep him from getting out, when a pair of frankly fantastic legs catch his eye right at the edge. He follows the tan slacks up to slim hips, a plaid shirt that ought to be locked up for crimes against fashion, takes in shoulders that make his mouth feel way too dry, to a face that isn't precisely beautiful, but there's something compelling about it, something that makes it hard to look away.

The man has pouty lips and very blue eyes, both of which are frowning in a way that takes Tony aback enough to make him stop in his tracks. Barnes is not so encumbered.

"Steve!" he shouts gleefully, climbing out of the pool with a grace that Tony covets at the best of times, even more so right now when he feels nothing but clumsy, so awkward it makes his skin feel too tight for his body.

Bucky rushes at apparently-Steve, throwing himself bodily at the guy. Tony raises an eyebrow calculated to deliver a whole speech in a single motion. Steve looks pointedly away, wrapping his arms around Bucky's back, completely unbothered by the fact he's being soaked through with pool water.

"Hey, Buck," he says, so softly that Tony has to strain to hear him. Bucky clings to him even when he pulls back to look up into his face, grin splitting his own in half.

"Goddamn it, Rogers, I've missed your ass," he declares, clapping Rogers on the shoulder.

Something's nagging at the back of Tony's mind as he drags himself out of the water, toes curling to catch on the non-slip surface. By the time he looks up again, Bucky's let go of the guy, though he's still grinning stupidly at him. Rogers' face softens when he looks at Bucky, those startling blue eyes of his damn near glowing with joy or whatever.

Bucky looks away first, catching Tony's eye. He looks--okay, Tony thought he knew the guy, after so many days of being practically inseparable, but he has never seen Barnes look so happy, so content. He's pretty sure that he's looking at Barnes' boyfriend right there, because, well. Has to be, right?


Steve Rogers. The name registers right around the time Rogers turns to him and glowers, generous mouth pursed in disapproval. Tony stares at him, for the first time in his life literally lost for words. He doesn't know what to say, faced with his father's biggest project, the sole reason he couldn't be bothered to spare any attention to his actual son. Howard used to say that Steve Rogers was small and scrawny, but what he lacked in power he made up in perseverance. This guy most emphatically does not lack in power. He looks like he could plow through a wall without even taking a run-up. It's all lean muscle, as far as Tony's eye can see, and plenty of it.

"You're Tony Stark?" Rogers says, voice thick with disappointment. It's probably the very worst thing he could have said to Tony, followed only by-- "You're nothing like your father," Steve continues, because of course he does, sounding so let-down that Tony wants to punch something --
starting with that stupid face of his.

"Thank you," he says flatly, because hell, guy just paid him a compliment as far as Tony's concerned, even if he meant it as an insult. "You're damn right I'm not."

Rogers' brow furrows even more; at his side, Bucky's bemusement starts edging into alarm. "Steve-.." he tries, but Rogers talks right over him.

"Howard Stark would never take advantage of a teammate like that, or engage in such obviously dangerous, foolhardy actions."

Tony goggles at him. "Are you for real?" he blurs, because hell, does this guy know whom he's talking about? Howard was way worse than Tony when it came to utilising any tactics that would bring him a win. "Barnes, is this guy serious? Let me ask you something, pal. If I'm such a bad person, how come I'm the one who's been winning all the medals, huh? Where the hell have you been for the past five years?"

Rogers blinks, face set. "Winning a medal does not make you right, or any less of a bully," he bites out, and wow, okay, Tony did not think he could hate another human being this much within minutes of meeting him.

"Fuck you," he spits out, furious. "You don't get to decide what I am just because you were Howard's precious golden boy. Get that sanctimonious stick out of your ass before you even think about talking to me again."

Rogers opens his mouth to say something back, but Tony doesn't bother waiting for whatever it is to get hurled at him. He turns on his heel and stalks off, blood boiling in his veins and pounding in his ears, every single one of Rogers' vicious, spiteful words ringing in his ears, making him feel completely, utterly worthless for the first time in years. The man is Howard's protege through and through, he thinks bitterly; no one else could succeed in destroying his hard-earned calm and confidence quite so thoroughly. He ignores Barnes' voice calling his name and the furious whispering behind his back that follows; he grabs his towel from where he'd thrown it over a chair a fucking lifetime ago and storms out of the pool, skin goosebumping in the cool of the unheated corridor. His hand is shaking when he holds it up in front of his face, but he can't feel a thing; he is utterly, completely numb. What was he thinking, coming here, his father's ghost behind every corner, ready to throw all his pathetic achievements right back in his face? What was he thinking, pitting himself against the great Howard Stark and his legacy? God, was he even thinking anything at all, besides a stupid wish to be seen as the worthy successor to the Stark name? Fuck, he should have stopped when he still could. He should have never given in to Obie's pleas and gone back into the pool.

The simple facts are these: he will never be his father, and he will never be anything but a fuck-up to those who knew him.

He barely makes it to the bathrooms before he shoulders his way inside a stall, slams the door behind himself, and is violently sick inside the unforgiving cold of the toilet bowl pressed to his chest.

He rests his head weakly against the wall when he's done, turns to slump with his back against it, drawing his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them like he hasn't done in a very long time. It's no more comforting than it was when he was eight years old, but it's familiar, as is the curl of misery in his gut. This time, though, the door isn't going to open quietly, and his mother isn't going to walk in on light feet, sit on the floor next to him and put her arm around him, draw him to her side, let him bury his head in her shoulder and cling, the sweet smell of her soothing his
unhappiness. No, because his mother is dead, too, and this is all he's got now, nothing but top-of-the-line swimwear he designed himself, muscles that he worked himself into the ground sculpting, stupid facial hair he should just shave off already, who did he think he was fooling. Essentially, nothing but himself, losing contour in his father's shadow.

He spends the rest of the day in his room, sitting on his bed with his back to the wall, legs drawn to his chest again for all the good that would do, ignoring Bucky and Rhodey's voices and pounding on the other side of the door, very seriously considering packing his bags and leaving in the middle of the night. The only thing that stops him is the knowledge that he just has too much stuff, and he'd have to abandon most of it or call Happy to get him, either of which would take too damn long to sort out.

He doesn't know how long he sits there, but he's lost feeling in his ass and his legs ache when there's yet another noise at the door. He lets his head bang on the wall, wondering when they're going to give up; he's not opening that door until he's sure he knows whether he's staying or going. This noise is different, though; he just about has time to wonder what the hell whoever it is is doing to his doorknob when the lock pops open and said doorknob twists, letting in the familiar figure of Barnes, albeit with hair tousled beyond recognition and tired, dull eyes.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" snarls Tony, ready to get off his bed and throw the guy out by any means necessary. To his consternation, Bucky walks calmly inside, closing the traitorous door behind himself and pocketing the twisted paperclips he apparently just used as lockpicks.

"Can it, Stark," he growls, throwing himself on the bed next to Tony and closing his eyes, letting his head tilt back with a groan. "What the fuck am I going to do with the two of you, I'll never know."

"You don't have to do a damn thing, it's not your fault everyone's precious Steve Rogers is a dick," Tony snaps.

Barnes fucking hits him. Granted, it's no more than a smack across the chest that doesn't hurt so much as sting, but it's the principle of the thing. "Watch your mouth," Barnes snaps while Tony gapes at him in affront. "That's my best pal you're talking about."

"Thought he was your boyfriend," Tony grumbles, rubbing at his chest even though he can hardly feel the hit anymore.

"Not that there's anything wrong with that, but no, he isn't. I've known the guy since we were both in diapers. We grew up together, went to England together -- yeah, to train with your dad, don't look at me like that. Just because we did doesn't automatically make us the bad guys."

"Rogers certainly thinks it gives him the right to judge everyone."

Bucky sighs, licking his lips and looking away. "Look, I'm going to tell you something, and I'm only telling you this because I think you won't be all that surprised, and it's not gonna make you think any worse of your old man than you clearly already do."

Tony looks at him, blinking. The old bitterness is back in Bucky's voice, and yeah, he's right, there isn't anything he could say that's going to make him think worse of Howard than he already does. "This ought to be good," he mutters, and ignores Bucky's glare.

"Howard was pretty obsessed with Steve's training," Bucky starts, looking straight at the opposite wall.
Tony, because he's Tony, can't quite hold back the "Tell me something I don't know." He doesn't actually expect an answer, but Bucky after he shakes his head at him, continues.

"Steve was a scrawny thing back then, and Howard's focus certainly didn't help. There were other kids in the program, many others, from all over England and Europe. They'd take one look at Steve and fail to see what all the fuss was about, why he was so special to Howard, why Howard bothered to ship him all the way out there from the States. And Steve, you gotta know something about Steve. He doesn't know how to quit. They threw every nasty trick in the book at him. Passing, drafting, contact all the fucking time, he couldn't swim a length without some asshole pulling something on him. Me, well, I was taller, a bit broader than him back then, I gave back as good as I got, so they knew that if they had a go at me I'd make them regret it. Steve, though, they'd look at him and think he was some privileged shit who didn't deserve to be there. Whenever Howard wasn't looking, Steve was a target. Got to the point where I'd have to swim with him all the time just so I could take some of that myself.

"What Steve doesn't know is that Howard knew. He knew about both of us being under attack, I'd see him watch us sometimes, out of the corner of his eye, when I was swimming slower to partner Steve. I think he thought it was good for us, made us stronger. But, see, one thing that Steve can't stand is bullies. It's like a trigger word for him. He thought Howard had our back, because one by one the bullies started falling back, but really, it was us getting better, him getting stronger, faster."

When Bucky falls silent, Tony slides him a look from the corner of his eye. Bucky's head is tilted against the wall, and his eyes are fixed on Tony's face.

"You don't look surprised," Bucky remarks; it's not exactly a question.

Tony snorts. "Yeah, well, I knew my father. He was an asshole. Though I'll tell you this much, he doted on Rogers. He was all Howard would talk about when I managed to get him on the phone at all. He might have had an odd way of showing it, but Rogers was really important to him. Much more than anyone else."

"More important than you?"

Tony sighs, lets his head hang back. "Yeah. Much more important than me. I don't hate him, if that's what you're getting at," he adds when Bucky keeps looking at him. "Okay, yeah, I might resent him a bit. I wasn't the one who called him a reckless bully, though," he finishes defensively. Bucky winces.

"Yeah. Look, he can get a bit fixated on things, sometimes. He saw us, and he just assumed. I set him straight, if it helps."

Tony says nothing. It doesn't, really. The fact is that Golden Boy Steve Rogers took one look at him and filed him neatly into a category that gives Tony hives just thinking about it. He feels ruffled, unsettled, and it's going to take more than a Rogers Background 101 from Bucky to make his skin stop prickling.

"He's a good guy, Tony," Bucky says quietly. "He's been through a lot. We're both orphans, did you know that? We grew up in an orphanage, and things were far from easy before Howard turned up. Say what you like about the guy, but he gave us a chance when he had no reason to look at us twice. I know it doesn't change the fact that he was a shitty father, and I'm not trying to defend him or anything. But Steve looked up to him, and for the most part, Howard didn't let him down."

"You didn't, though," Tony says, reading between the lines. Bucky's mouth twists into a smirk that
has nothing to do with amusement.

"Yeah, well. I wasn't important. I'm pretty sure Howard only took me on because Steve refused to leave without me. Besides. I've never been particularly fond of bullies myself," he finishes, lip curling to flash a canine to the light.

They sit in silence for what feels like a long time. Thoughts chase each other inside Tony's head, flighty and elusive. He replays the scene Rogers saw in his head, thinks about what he himself would have thought if it had been Rhody, or Pepper in Bucky's place in the pool, and considers the possibility that yeah, he can be a bit of an asshole at times. He doesn't feel like throwing up again at the end of the review, which is pretty much a straight-up win at this point.

"So you and Rogers never..." Tony wonders out loud, because he might as well. Bucky looks at him blankly before he realises what Tony's asking.

"Nah. I love Steve, don't get me wrong, just not like that. I'm not really into guys. Sometimes I wish I was, because, well. Steve's one of a kind. But..." he hesitates, gives Tony a harder look than he has done all evening. "Tony, I'm telling you this because I don't want there to be more miscommunication between you and Steve, okay? And I'm counting on you to not be a dick about it, yeah?"

"Okay," Tony draws out, wondering what the hell Bucky could have to say that would warrant a warning like that.

"Steve and I used to catch a lot of flack from the other guys. They also thought he and I were a thing. So I guess what I'm saying is, keep that in mind when you make the inevitable wisecrack about it, yeah?"

Tony stares at him, appalled. "You think I'd give either of you shit about being gay?" he demands.

Well, now he's pissed.

Bucky gives him the first proper smile of the evening. "I know you wouldn't; or at least, you wouldnt mean to, but Steve -- he can get a bit touchy when he thinks someone's giving me a hard time."

"No shit," Tony grumbles, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, he can get a bit protective like that. Like I said. We've been through some things."

"Fuck," Tony groans, running his hands over his face. For the first time, he's kind of glad he never got to train with a bunch of other kids when he was younger. He hadn't been the strongest, toughest kid in the world back then, either, and considering how early on he'd started recognising the fact that guys did it for him about as often as girls, it would have been a nightmare.

Bucky hums in agreement, and suddenly Tony's fucking exhausted.

"Did he get you to come up here?" he mumbles, rubbing knuckles into his sore eyes.


"I don't have anything to apologise for," Tony snaps, instantly defensive. Bucky sighs, sounding about as wiped as Tony feels.

"Jesus, the two of you will be the death of me," he groans.
Tony slides sideways until he can stretch his tired limbs down the length of the bed, draping them on top of Bucky's muscled thighs. Bucky doesn't shove him off, but he does send him an unimpressed look, then slides to standing.

"Fuck, I'm done. I'm gonna go crash before I pass out on top of you."

"Wouldn't mind," Tony slurs, somehow finding the energy for a weak leer. Bucky rolls his eyes at him, shoving two hands through the mess of his hair and rubbing hard to wake himself up enough to leave.

Or he tries to, because the door? Isn't opening.

"Fuck you, Barnes, did you break my damn door now?" Tony groans sleepily, shoving his head under his pillow in the hopes it'll shut off the world.

"Sorry," Bucky says sheepishly, jiggling the doorknob. It immediately fails to open once again. "Fuck."

"I can't deal with this shit right now," Tony tells him. "It's the middle of the night. Get in the bed."

"Why, Mr Stark, this is all so sudden," Bucky deadpans, but he climbs over Tony, wedging himself between Tony's back and the wall. "Budge up."

"S my bed," Tony complains, but shifts forward a bit, enough so Bucky's elbow isn't digging into his kidney. It's not a big bed, but it's not small, either; it's bigger than a single, and it's so comfortable that Tony has to force himself out of it some mornings.

Bucky fits himself against his back, throws a careless arm over his middle. "Don't get any ideas," he warns, but he's warm, and his breath teases the back of Tony's neck, and Tony's asleep before he can muster the energy to give him a hard time about it.

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There are loud voices outside his door when he next cracks his eyes open. He's almost hanging off the bed, because fucking Barnes is sprawled on his back behind him, taking up most of the space and snoring quietly.

The doorknob rotates again, which is what must have woken Tony up in the first place.

"Yes, I'm sure," someone says right on the other side as the door shudders in its frame. "He hasn't been back to his room, and the last place I saw him heading for was up here."

By this time, Tony thinks he knows who's speaking, and he briefly considers making a bid for escape out of his window. Pity his room is on the third floor.

"Barnes, wake up," he rasps, pushing himself to sitting and rubbing blearily over his face. "Your BFF is here."

Bucky mumbles something in his sleep, turning to throw an arm around Tony's waist and bury his head in his hip. "Five more minutes, baby," Tony hears muffled against the same sweatpants he'd worn all day yesterday.
"Fuck," he says, with feeling, at the exact same moment as the doorknob finally gives and Rogers tumbles inside the room, door slamming against the wall.

He stops, opens his mouth, takes in the sight of the bed, and Tony could swear he can see all the blood drain from Rogers' face.

Tony considers saying "This isn't what it looks like," because it really, really isn't, but before he can line up any words to that effect, Rogers' face closes down and a blank expression takes over, sapping all emotion from his features. To his surprise, Tony feels a pang of guilt for having caused it.

"I was going to ask you if you had seen Bucky, but it looks like we found him," Steve says, voice perfectly level. At Tony's side, Bucky's head snaps up, and he looks around the room muzzily.

"Why am I in your bed, Stark?" he wonders mildly, voice hoarse with sleep.

"Because you broke my fucking door last night, remember?" Tony says, resigned to this little happenstance making the rounds within the hour.

"Ah," Bucky says, a hint of apology in the way he carefully disentangles his arms from around Tony's waist and crawls out of the bottom half of the bed. "Now I do."

Rogers' face, meanwhile, is making an odd sort of expression, like it's stuck and can't seem to work out what it's supposed to look like.

"You broke his door?" he asks in the end while Bucky is stretching next to the window, yawning widely.

"Yeah," Bucky says on the exhale, scratching at his belly. "Let me tell you, a comfortable bed partner you ain't, Tony. No offence."

"Hey," Tony protests, taking plenty of offence, thanks. "I'm a very comfortable person to sleep next to. I've never had any complaints."

"Yeah, whatever," Bucky says, clearly unconvinced. Tony kind of maybe pouts a little.

Rogers is taking all this in silently, eyes darting between the two of them, clearly discomfited.

"I'll call maintenance, then, shall I?" he says, which is a bit unnecessary seeing as Tony can see three staff members outside the door, all on their cell phones. Fuck, if this isn't on the internet by lunchtime Tony is going to be seriously surprised.

"Gentlemen," Coulson says from outside the door, poking his head in. "I see you're all accounted for. Get in gear and get moving, you've ten minutes to practice."

"Jesus, Coulson, have a heart," Tony groans, clutching at his head. He feels like he's barely slept at all, and Rogers is staring at him.

"I can take yours, if you'd rather," Coulson says calmly, and Tony gets the hint, pushing off the bed.

"Slave driver," he grumbles, and wait, is that a smile lifting the corner of Rogers' mouth? Surely not.

Practice that day is gruelling. With Rogers on board, Coulson seems to get some kind of sadistic
joy out of pushing the four of them to the very limits of their endurance. The worst thing is, Rogers is barely breaking a sweat. Even Bucky is breathing hard, and he's got stamina like Tony has never seen. Rogers? Looks fresh as a fucking daisy. Lost in a haze of exhaustion and dehydrated hallucinations, Tony realises two things.

1) He is looking at the next big thing in distance swimming;

2) If he wants to swipe any medals from under Rogers' long, straight nose, he's going to have to work a damn sight harder than he's been doing so far.

True, Rogers is a little bit slow off the start, and Tony, a seasoned sprinter and mid-distancer, is going to take as much advantage of that as he can, but yeah, he can't hope to win anything upwards of 400m with this guy competing.

At last, Rhodey crawls out of the pool and declares he's done for the day. Tony isn't exactly the poster boy of knowing when to quit, but his back hurts and so do his shoulders and Coulson is giving him a Look, so Tony crawls out after Rhodey, taking his lead and collapsing over the top of one of the benches lining the walls of the pool.

Steve and Bucky keep going. Tony is almost a little offended that Bucky never told him he had stamina quite like this. Tony wastes a long minute bemoaning Bucky's lack of adventurous spirit in the bedroom before a stray thought of what Rogers must be like in bed, by that same logic, intervenes and makes him quickly find something, anything else to think about.

"You all right?" Rhodey asks him, poking him with one long foot.

"Sure," Tony lies, stamping down highly inappropriate images. The guy's a dick, for fuck's sake, Tony doesn't care what Bucky says.

He's also a damn fine swimmer, Tony can't argue with that, much as he'd have liked to. Strong arms and powerful legs propel him through the water like a torpedo, leaving a mass of bubbles in his wake. He has a tendency to hog the lane a little, though Tony can see it's not really intentional -- it's just, the guy's big. Huge shoulders, thick arms, they take up space like it's their job. Bucky, not a small guy by a long shot himself, almost gets dwarfed next to him.

"Really? Because you're glaring at Rogers pretty fiercely," Rhodey says, sitting up and reaching for his towel, wiping down his chest. "Don't burn a hole through his back now."

Tony makes a face at him, but yeah, he's busted. "Gotta check out the competition," he tries.

"Uh huh," Rhodey says, raising an eyebrow at him. "From what I heard, you two almost tore out each other's throats yesterday."

"A small misunderstanding," Tony somehow says without choking. "He's a dick."

"Right," Rhodey drawls, eyeing Tony over the top of his towel when he dries his face. "Well, then. I'll leave you to your research."

Tony scowls at his back, because fuck, Rhodey knows just what to say to make him see how stupid he's being. He has no business taking Rogers' measurements from across the pool. It's not like the guy would welcome Tony's help, even though his trunks are about as old as Bucky's.

Tony's not a stupid guy. He can put two and two together and make quite a bit more than just four. The two of them are orphans who grew up in a Children's Home. Ergo they haven't much money to speak of now, let alone back when Howard found them. Swimming is not a cheap sport. You can't
just decide to take up competitive swimming -- there's equipment, fees for facilities as well as coaching, entry fees to meets. Not to mention that the other kids they'd run into at those meets would have the very best of everything purchased by their doting parents.

Tony's also not blind. The trunks and goggles both Bucky and Rogers are wearing are Stark Industries-made, the last models his father worked on before his death. It's not hard to imagine how they might have come across them. Tony would bet 50% of his net worth that Howard had given them one of each for testing, but that was a long time ago. The fact that they're still wearing them tells Tony that a) fucking excellent quality on that material, he ought to look into it again; and b) it's extremely likely that they don't have the money to spend on new equipment. From what he'd heard, Bucky's been competing in local and national meets, but Rogers... He still hasn't heard a single thing about what Rogers has been doing once he dropped off the map following Howard's death.

He puts that to the back of his mind for now, because he can't do anything about that. He could go ferreting for information, but if Rogers ever found out he'd no doubt do that lip pursing thing again, and it's not something Tony wants directed at him twice.

Besides. The other thing is just such an opportunity. He isn't the best designer of swimming gear this country has ever seen for nothing.

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net  
To: R_D_dept@starkindustries.net  
Date: February 07, 2012 12:43  
Subject: designs, now

I need you to forward me all the StarkSuits designs from 1997, including the polymer files, everything my father worked on for 36 months before and after, and I need it yesterday.

Tony Stark

Anthony Stark  
CEO  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: R_D_dept@starkindustries.net  
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: February 07, 2012 14:55  
Subject: Re: designs, now
Mr Stark,

Those designs have been classified by Mr Stane to not leave the premises. I can send you the polymer files, though, those are obsolete now.

Sincerely,

Dr Florence Barker

Dr Florence Barker
Head of R&D Department
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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*From: tstark@starkindustries.net*
*To: R_D_dept@starkindustries.net*
*Date: February 07, 2012 16:12*
*Subject: Re: Re: designs, now*

Did you just seriously refuse to carry out a direct order from your CEO?

Tony Stark

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

*From: tstark@starkindustries.net*
*To: ostane@starkindustries.net*
*Date: February 07, 2012 16:14*
*Subject: what the fuck??*

I can't fucking believe you've instructed R&D to keep those designs classified. They're old news!!

--Tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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From: ostane@starkindustries.net
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 16:25
Subject: Re: what the fuck??

Sorry, Tony. Those are Howard's instructions that he left with me. Hope you're having fun out west.

Obadiah Stane
COO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: R_D_dept@starkindustries.net
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 16:14
Subject: Re: Re: Re: designs, now

Mr Stark,

I'm very sorry. Mr Stane was very adamant. Did you want the polymer research?

Sincerely,

Dr Florence Barker

Dr Florence Barker
Head of R&D Department
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---
From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: R_D_dept@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 16:33
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: designs, now

Yes, send me the damn polymer files.

Tony Stark

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
Date: February 07, 2012 16:48
Subject: i am going to fucking kill obie and you're gonna help me bury the body

how am i supposed to work like this?????

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 16:51
Subject: Re: i am going to fucking kill obie and you're gonna help me bury the body

Certainly, sir. I can provide a variety of digging instruments, and the back gardens are due for a remodelling anyway. Shall I make an appointment?

J.
From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
Date: February 07, 2012 17:03
Subject: Re: Re: i am going to fucking kill obie and you're gonna help me bury the body

no need to be like that. :( 

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 07, 2012 17:04
Subject: FWD: i am going to fucking kill obie and you're gonna help me bury the body

Attc: To All Stark Industries Employees: Directives Regarding Information Requested By Anthony Edward Stark.pdf

Ms Potts,

If I may advise you to email Mr Stark? I believe his stress levels are above the norm for him at this time of year.

Sincerely,

Anton Ivanov Jarvis

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
Date: February 07, 2012 17:10
Subject: Re: FWD: i am going to fucking kill obie and you're gonna help me bury the body
Oh, dear god.

Thank you, Jarvis.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

---

From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 17:15
Subject: I hear you could use some burrowing skills

Don't let him get to you, Tony. What do you need those designs for, anyway? You can make your own that are going to be at least fifty times better.

I love you. Take care of yourself.

Pepper

P.S.: Heard about the new addition to the team. How are you getting on with him?

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 07, 2012 18:20
Subject: godDAMN it's good to hear from you

Steve Rogers is a dick. Obadiah Stane is a dick. Nick Fury is a demanding asshole, and so's Phil Coulson. I hate everyone.
Except maybe not Bucky. Bucky's okay.

Damn it, Pepper, they need new StarkSuits, they can't carry on with those antiquated granny pants. I think Dad was onto something with the durable polymer, though, and I need to work out how it can mesh with the breathable material. BUT I CAN'T DO THAT IF FUCKING OBIE IS BLOCKING ME OFF. DOESN'T HE GET THAT I'M GOING TO MAKE US ALL FILTHY RICH??? :( 

Tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 18:25
Subject: That good, huh

You're already filthy rich, Tony. Can't you try to get along with Rogers for the sake of the team? He's Bucky's best friend, isn't he?

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 07, 2012 18:33
Subject: not you too!!

I CAN GET ALONG WITH HIM JUST FINE. HE DOESN'T WANT TO GET ALONG WITH ME. :( Captain fucking America has a stick up his ass the size of Stark Tower, okay. He's not perfect, either! Okay so he's had a tough life. Who hasn't?? It's not like mine was sunshine and
roses! >:(

Tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 18:47
Subject: have you tried talking to him?

Like, actually talking, not using sarcasm as a lethal weapon.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 07, 2010 19:33
Subject: what's the point?

he thinks i'm a bully, Pep. he thinks the fucking sun shines out of howard's ass. you can't even--he thought i was--fuck. Bucky said he talked to him, but he's been scowling all the time, the second i walk in the pool. i don't even know why i'm bothering to make suits for the guy, i don't even know if he'll wear them.

tony

Anthony Stark
From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 19:43
Subject: Re: what's the point?

You're not, though, Tony. You're a good guy. Give him a chance to see that without shoving him away as fast as he can go. Don't even try to deny it; I know you.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 07, 2012 19:56
Subject: do i have to?

ugh fine. tbh his sad puppy eyes are pissing me off already. it's not like i'm stealing his bff! he's the one who keeps taking over my bed.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London
From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 07, 2012 19:58
Subject: Yes.

...I'm not even touching that one. I'm sure you know what you're doing.

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 13, 2012 12:11
Subject: OKAY YOU KNOW WHAT FUCK THIS I'M DONE

CAN YOU JUST I DON'T KNOW CALL JARVIS AND TELL HIM TO SEND HAPPY TO PICK ME UP OR LIKE ASK HIM TO COME HIMSELF I DON'T CARE I'M DONE WITH THIS SHIT AND STEVE FUCKING ROGERS CAN SHOVE IT UP HIS ASS AND CHOKE ON IT.

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 13, 2012 12:15
Subject: Re: OKAY YOU KNOW WHAT FUCK THIS I'M DONE

Tony, what--your phone says you're out of range, what's going on??
From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 13, 2012 12:18
Subject: Re: Re: OKAY YOU KNOW WHAT FUCK THIS I'M DONE

i hate him i fucking hate him so much, who the fuck does he think he is, where does he get off accusing me of not pulling my weight on the team I AM THE DAMN TEAM HOW MANY MEDALS DO HE OR BARNES OR RHODEY HAVE?? well okay Rhodey has a couple MY POINT STANDS. fuck this shit. i can train just fine at home too.

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 13, 2012 12:22
Subject: Re: Re: Re: OKAY YOU KNOW WHAT FUCK THIS I'M DONE

What happened? Why would he say that to you? You train just as hard as everyone else, if not harder!

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: February 13, 2012 12:31
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: OKAY YOU KNOW WHAT FUCK THIS I'M DONE

yeah thanks i know that. i don't know, i maybe haven't slept in a couple of days, i was trying to make this fusion work and with the training and i didn't want to lag behind and i may have passed out in the water i don't remember. he didn't have to yell at me like that though, what, he thinks i'm doing all this for me?? i already have the best swimming gear in the country. he doesn't get to tell me i'm not doing what's best for the team. fucker.

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: February 13, 2012 12:37
Subject: YOU DID WHAT????

ANTHONY EDWARD STARK. WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?? You can't pull one of your demented, self-destructive workaholic stunts in the middle of such an intensive training period!! I'm not surprised Mr Rogers had a go at you. I'm surprised Coach Fury didn't!

Jesus Christ, Tony. You could have died, you idiot. Look, I understand that this is important to you, but God, so is your health.

Also I don't think Mr Rogers meant what you think he meant about you not doing what's best for the team. You are part of that team now, Tony. You need to take care of yourself. Keeping yourself in optimum condition is good for the team; running yourself into the ground, however good your intentions are, isn't. Okay? Need me to repeat myself? Because I will, until you get it into that thick skull of yours that you are important, too.

Honestly, for a genius, you're pretty dumb.
Two weeks later, after more stony silences than Tony can take with any kind of equanimity, and a level of guilt that he does not want to experience again in this lifetime, there's a quiet knock at Tony's door. It's so late on Friday that it's early Saturday morning by now, hours after Rhodey had poked his head in, taken one look at Tony bent over the sprawl of computers he had rigged on the fly in his cramped room almost a month ago, and left him to it with a knowing smirk. Tony looks briefly away from the screen, eyes blurry with staring at polymer specs all night, fuzzy mind wondering who it could possibly be. Bucky is sprawled out on his bed again, having given up talking to him when he's in the zone like that, and Coulson is away from base, something to do with the Land of Enchantment, whatever the fuck that is.

The door opens a cautious crack, to admit dark blond hair and a pair of very blue eyes.

"Mr Stark, I'm not disturbing you?" Rogers asks awkwardly, eyes straying to Bucky's prone figure on the bed.

Tony schools his face, leans back and rubs his knuckles into his eyes, pressing until he sees stars. He's been trying, they both have, and he's tired, so tired of walking on eggshells all the time.

"Hey, Cap," he says, voice rough with disuse. Rogers is making a face at him when he looks again, and Tony grins darkly. "You call me Mr Stark and I'll call you Captain fucking America, okay? Get with the program."

A shy, if somewhat exasperated smile graces Rogers' face. "Tony, then. Working on taking over the world?"

Tony laughs. "Yeah, one swimsuit at a time. Wanna see?"

Rogers looks surprised to be asked, but comes inside eagerly enough, shutting the door behind him. The room is dim but for the glow of the screen and blinking LED lights from the portable fax machine and wafer-thin scanner set up on top of a pile of cardboard boxes. They color Rogers' face an eerie blue, making his eyes sparkle. Tony tears his own eyes away with some effort.

He clicks through a few windows until he lands on the design he's been adjusting, dragging and dropping the colors he means to use for it with a flick of his wrist -- blue, red, white, all-American colors for an all-American team.

Rogers squints at the screen, then rears back. "Did you just put a giant star on the crotch of that swimsuit?" he asks, scandalised.

Tony's grin is threatening to split his face in half; he can't hold back the slightly evil chuckles at the look on Rogers face. He looks appalled, and Tony should not find that quite so gratifying.
"Why not?" he counters, because, yeah, okay, he's not actually going to leave it there, but Rogers doesn't need to know that. "Eyes on the prize and all that."

"Tony, you can't put a star on a person's privates," Rogers tells him, sounding perfectly reasonable and expecting to be understood immediately. Tony briefly considers fucking with him some more, but there's a surprising twitch in the corner of Rogers' lips that is somehow fascinating, and it makes it hard to look away.

"Ah, you're no fun," he grumbles lightly, catching the whole thing and transferring it to the side, over the swimmer's hip, resizing it by 20%. "There. Better?"

Rogers leans in to take a closer look; all of a sudden, Tony can feel the warmth the guy's body gives off like a furnace all the way down his back, hear the light exhales close by his ear, catch a whiff of cologne, something woody, fresh. His heart feels like it's beating double-time, which is patently ridiculous, because a) Rogers is still a dick, trying or no, and b) Tony Stark is a grown man who does not get turned on by mere proximity and a nice smell, okay. He doesn't.

He clears his throat, and Rogers starts; out of the corner of his eye, Tony sees him turning his head, feels his eyes on the side of his face. He refuses to look, stares at the screen with all he's worth, adamantly does not think about the fact that if he just tilts his head back, his lips will be about an inch away from Rogers' plush mouth. This is not right.

He makes a show of changing windows again, bringing up the chemical compounds he'd been studying before Rogers barged in. The files are old, well before his time at Stark Industries -- they bear the signature of Howard A. Stark in the bottom left corner, and they contain notes on a polymer that, if Tony could work out how to synthesize it without it costing upwards of $60,000 per square meter, will make him the richest man in the world. Still, if he puts R&D back on it, they might have enough in a month to create four pairs of swimming trunks and goggles that will be so far above the current technical level of manufacturers in the field, it would be like comparing untreated iron ore to adamantium.

He's perfectly sure it looks like so much Greek to Rogers, who pulls back from behind Tony's shoulder, rising to his full (impressive) height and stretching in a long, taut line that Tony absolutely does not follow in the reflection he throws on the darkened windows.

"Is he gonna sleep here tonight?" Rogers asks, tipping his head at the lump that is Barnes taking up all of Tony's bed, again.

"I don't know," Tony grumbles, giving up for the night and stretching himself, yawning hugely. "Is his own bed broken or something, why does he insist on hogging mine all the time?"

Rogers looks down at Bucky for a long moment, face softening.

"You're good for him," he says, with an edge of something in his voice that Tony can't identify.

"Is that right? I thought I was a bad influence," Tony throws back, much gentler than he means to.

Rogers smiles slightly; it makes him look so much younger and happier than usual, even though he's actually a couple years younger than Tony, Tony knows this from his file that he isn't supposed to have read.

"I'm pretty sure by this point it's the reverse," Rogers says, with a hint of amusement. "There's not much that can be a worse influence than Buck himself when he likes you. And he sure likes you, Tony."
Rogers looks almost... sad. "It's not like that," blurs Tony, though for the life of him he doesn't understand what he intends it to mean. "He told me he wasn't into guys," he finishes lamely when Rogers arches an eyebrow in his direction.

*That* sends Rogers into a fit of the first earnest laughter that Tony has ever heard from him.

"I know he's not. And I know you are, which probably makes Bucky like you even more. He's always had a soft spot for the underdog."

Tony scowls darkly at the thought that he could be the underdog at anything. He opens his mouth, but whatever he means to say gets derailed completely when Rogers looks at him full-on, not out of the corner of his eye, not down from whatever high perch he's levered himself onto, just an honest, open look. It makes Tony want to fidget, and maybe hide a little.

"You're not at all like I thought you would be," Rogers says thoughtfully, and Tony's stomach drops, because he doesn't think he could handle another Steve Rogers Disapproves speech -- well. Ever. Rogers' eyes widen, though, when he sees it, and he shakes his head immediately. "No, that's not what I mean. I never should have said those things back on that first day, but--I find it a little hard to keep calm when I think I see someone being taken advantage of--and I know that wasn't what happened then, okay, no need to glare at me like that. For what it's worth to you, I'm sorry. You're a good guy, Tony. If Bucky likes you, that's more than good enough for me. Sure, I wish you'd take care of yourself more, but we're a team now. We'll look after each other from now on."

Tony blinks up at him, tall and painfully earnest and so *real* that Tony has trouble processing it, and wonders what the hell he's supposed to say to that.

"Um. Thanks?" he tries, fingers fidgeting with the pen he'd absentmindedly picked up.

"No problem," Rogers says, sending him such a blinding smile that Tony is left staring dazedly in the wake of it, when Rogers turns around and nudges Barnes to sitting, then throws Barnes' arm over his shoulder and lifts him in a fireman's carry, making it look indecently easy. Tony swallows fitfully. Barnes mutters something unintelligible when Rogers shoulders the door open, pausing for a second before half-turning back. "Oh, and Tony?"

"Gngh?" Tony manages somehow, trying not to stare at the bulging muscles of his arms balancing Barnes' not-inconsiderable weight to perfection.

"I'd like for you to call me Steve," Steve says, with another one of those earnest smiles that makes Tony's skin prickle all over.

"Sure?" Tony replies weakly, helplessly looking on as Steve nods at him amiably and walks away like he isn't carrying 150+ lbs of a grown man over his shoulder.

"Get some rest," he says, muffled and almost inaudible, just before the door closes behind his sculpted back, abruptly and unwelcomingly depriving Tony of the spectacular sight. "Ngh?" he whines to himself before giving up, toppling off his chair onto the bed and burying his face in covers that smell faintly of Barnes' musky scent. He must be more tired than he thought, or else his remaining braincells are misfiring badly, because for a moment he finds himself wishing his pillow smelled more like clean citrus than spicy musk.

And then his brain blissfully decides that there's been enough of this pathetic behaviour already, and shorts out altogether.
From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
Date: May 02, 2012 07:38
Subject: plane tickets to London

hey Jarvis do me a favor, book the four of us on a flight to London for 22nd July? call up the London office, tell them we'll be needing the penthouse from then until the end of August. thanks!

tony

oh and get tickets for yourself and Pepper if either of you want to come--in fact scratch that. book yourselves in, too, put the tickets and the hotel rooms for the two of you on my account, you know the codes. what's the point in having you two on retainer if i can't get you to have some fun on my dime once in a while? :D

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: May 02, 2012 07:40
Subject: clear your schedule Pep i’m taking you flying

pack a couple nice dresses, too, the guys wanna go out while we're there.

tony

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

---
Ms Potts,

I believe we just got our marching orders. Where would you like to stay while we are in London?

Sincerely,

A. Jarvis

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From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
Date: May 02, 2012 08:12
Subject: Re: FWD: plane tickets to London

Dear Jarvis,

So I saw. Good thing I'd already booked the time off. I don't mind where we stay; I'm sure you have a few options lined up already. I am fond of the Claridge's bathroom suites, though.

Thank you for organising all of this. Do let me know what information you need from me, and if I can be of any help!

Best,

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

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From: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: May 02, 2012 10:33
Subject: Re: Re: FWD: plane tickets to London

Attc: flight details.doc
Ms Potts,

Claridge's it is. I already have your personal information on file from the Beijing trip. I took the liberty of noting that your passport hasn't expired yet. Please find attached all the flight details. We are booked on the red-eye flight leaving at 21:20.

Sincerely,

A. Jarvis

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From: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: May 02, 2012 10:34
Subject: Re: plane tickets to London
Attc: flight details.doc

Please find attached the booking details; our flights leave at 21:20 on 22nd July. Ms Potts has been advised. I took the liberty of engaging suites at Claridge's for myself and Ms Potts. The London office has asked me to relate that they are looking forward to your visit. Shall I pack for you as well, sir? I presume the usual red-and-gold colour scheme is still in effect? That should make you nicely inconspicuous.

J.

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com
Date: May 02, 2012 13:22
Subject: Re: Re: plane tickets to London

stop sassing me, you. the red and gold it is. it'll be a nice precursor to bringing home all the medals again.

claridge's, huh. nice. you deserve it.

thanks.

tony

Anthony Stark
From: jarvis_ai@gmail.com  
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: May 02, 2012 13:40  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: plane tickets to London

I am gratified to see that your ego is still in excellent health, sir. I should expect you back in Los Angeles in two months, I presume? Although I must say that I shall miss the peace and quiet of the city in your absence.

J.

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From: tstark@starkindustries.net  
To: jarvis_ai@gmail.com  
Date: May 02, 2012 13:44  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: plane tickets to London

awwww, i missed you too, honey. don't pine, i'll be home soon.

tony

Anthony Stark  
CEO  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London
THE AMERICAN DREAMBOAT

STEVE ROGERS and his meteoric rise from obscurity to World Record Holder, and what his entry into the Olympics might mean for TONY STARK, only in GQ America: The London 2012 Olympics Issue

words by Gabriella Ramirez

July, 2012

Four years after we last had the pleasure of speaking to a world-class swimmer, I am once again heading into just such a meeting, this time with Steve Rogers, this country's next big hope for Gold
Mr Rogers is, not to put it too lightly, the embodiment of the American Dream. Rising from virtual anonymity, he has triumphed at the recent Olympic Trials for the London 2012 Games, not just securing a spot on the team but also quietly, without much fuss, breaking right through the current World Record for Men's 1500m. He joins other familiar names, such as Tony Stark and James Rhodes, in the US Swimming Team's quest for medals in this year's Summer Olympics.

We have been granted an interview with Mr Rogers during the relatively free few days before the team departs for London. I meet Mr Rogers in downtown Los Angeles, a small family-run restaurant off a narrow side street, quiet at this time of day. Steve Rogers, unlike Tony Stark, is punctual to the minute: he waits for me inside already as I rush in, having stopped my car a few blocks away. A young man in his early twenties, he nevertheless rises and takes my hand, nodding over it. This interviewer admits to being rather charmed by his perfect manners.

GR: Mr Rogers, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.

Rogers ducks his head, a small smile on his lips.

SR: My pleasure. I must admit that I'm still confused by people wanting to know more about me. I'm just a regular guy.

GR: A regular guy who just smashed through the 1500m record, and qualified for the US Olympics team on his first try. It's quite an achievement, Mr Rogers.

SR: Please call me Steve. Thank you, I am very happy with my performance. I gave it my best.

GR: You have become part of a very strong team, possibly one of the strongest this country has ever seen. Are you and your teammates on friendly terms?

SR: Well, I'm sorry to say that I don't know most of them. The only people I do know are the ones I have been training with for the past few months, Tony Stark, James Rhodes, and Bucky Barnes.

GR: You and Mr Barnes have known each other for a much longer time than your other teammates. You trained together under the legendary Howard Stark, did you not?

A fond smile takes over Mr Rogers' face at the question.

SR: Yes, we have known each other almost since the moment we were born. Our mothers met at the delivery ward, and we lived very close to each other when we were younger. We have been friends ever since we could walk, I think. He is the closest thing I have to a family.

GR: Both you and Mr Barnes lost your mothers tragically young, and neither of you knew your fathers. Did that play a factor in how you remained such close friends?

SR: I believe it did. We also, very fortunately, had the same talent: we could swim. Howard Stark really was the best thing that could have happened to us. He took us in, even though he was under no obligation to do so, and he offered us a future. I will forever be grateful for that.

GR: And now you have the chance to work with the man's son. Do you feel like you have come full circle?

SR: In a way. Tony Stark is very different from his father, but they both have that drive to win, the
determination to be the best. And they both achieved that, I think.

GR: Tell us about the time you spent in England working with Mr Stark Sr.

SR: In many ways, it was the happiest time of my life. Bucky and I had never been outside of the States, and travelling to England was a dream come true for two orphans from Brooklyn. Working with Howard was an inspiration; the man earned every superlative you could throw at him. He was a great coach, and he put together an amazing team of talented people. I am still great friends with many of them.

GR: Are you referring to The Flying Commandos?

SR: (laughs) Where did you hear that name? Yes, they called us that once, Dum Dum Dugan, Morita, Gabe, Lorraine, Falsworth, Peggy, Bucky and I, a few others. To be honest with you, we were all a bunch of misfits that just happened to swim like the devil was after us. There were many others, too, but Howard made a point of giving anyone a try, and kids came and went all the time. We were the ones who remained for the duration of the program, until Howard's death.

GR: Must have been hard for you, to lose your mentor so suddenly.

SR: It was. It broke our group apart, which was very traumatic for kids like us who practically lived together. We had no other family but each other. Coming back to the States was difficult, but for Bucky and I it was the only choice -- as I am sure you're aware, the immigration laws of Great Britain are quite strict about who can work in the country and who can't. At the time, we did not fulfill the requirements, and so we came home.

GR: You spent the years after your return working with children with a similar background to yourself and Mr Barnes.

SR: I did. It was the most fulfilling work I have ever engaged in. I love working with kids, and I love coaching. It gives me great pleasure to see their hard work pay off, to see them gain confidence that is often sadly lacking in children who have lost their parents. I hope I don't sound immodest, but I believe that I do good work there, and I make a difference. It's all I have ever wanted to do with my life.

GR: You and Mr Barnes both qualified at the top of your heats. Are you hoping you will catch the attention of sponsors looking for athletes to support?

SR: I'm not sure how much I can say about that at this point. I'd prefer not to answer the question. Bucky and I are talking about it, certainly.

GR: Coach Nick Fury has talked about his hopes for a US win at the 4 x 100m freestyle relay at these Games. All four of you have qualified. The hopes of a nation rest on you.

SR: I can only hope we deliver.

GR: Will you and Tony Stark be in direct competition against each other?

SR: Tony and I have very different styles; he is a sprinter and mid-distancer, and I am a long distance swimmer. I wish him all the very best of luck in his events.

GR: And the very best of luck to you too, Steve. I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we're wishing you every success.
SR: Thank you so much. It means a lot to me to have the support of the American people. I hope I don't disappoint them.

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"Is that all you're bringing?" Tony asks, eyeing the two small carryalls at Steve's feet askance. "We'll be there for like a month."

Steve sends him a small smile. "Not everyone needs seven suitcases like you, Tony."

Tony makes a face at that, feeling personally affronted. "Seriously, you need more than what's in there, I'll bet the suits on it."

Steve's face softens and brightens at the same time. Tony swallows dryly, finding a small smile back for him. He's had plenty of time in the past couple of months to come to terms with the fact that a) Steve isn't really a dick, and b) Tony is in fact distressingly fond of him--and at the same time, not nearly time enough to be able to file it neatly away into a corner of his mind so it doesn't blindside him all the time, in the middle of the day, in perfectly innocuous circumstances. Tony can't even bring the guy a cup of coffee without getting blasted by Steve's grateful smile and his heart making a bid for escape.

He doesn't even know how the hell it happened; he'd be fucked if he can pinpoint a moment in time where Steve went from 'asshole' to 'huh' in his mind, let alone the point when he progressed to 'oh my god the things I want to do to you'. Because Tony wants to. Do things to him, that is. And it wasn't even the moment when he pushed and prodded Steve into trying the new StarkSuit, once Tony had worked out how to marry Howard's and his version of best, most durable material into one. The new suits are breathable yet strong; they glide through the water yet they don't repel it. They feel like tissue paper over the skin instead of the rough printer paper feel of the competition, and they also keep the body warmth in, so a swimmer doesn't get chills. They are, if Tony says so himself, a work of fucking art.

And on Steve, the suits come alive. They hug every inch of him, from regulation-above-the-knee to the tops of his hips, the waistline resting just below the edges of his obliques. Tony's mouth had run completely dry once Steve had emerged from the changing rooms, abs flexing as he adjusted the fit. His strong thighs made the red and white detail fucking glow, and the distinctive star in the middle of shield-shaped stripes of red and white and blue made him look like some kind of superhero.

Okay, so maybe that moment does feature quite heavily in some of Tony's dreams. He'd hardly been able to look Steve in the eye for a week straight the first time it happened, but the frequency had only escalated once they'd started training in the new gear. All four of them wear it, and Tony has given orders for the whole of the US swimming team to get access to this design, but not even Barnes' and Rhodey's shaped, toned bodies do them as much justice as Steve's.

"You okay?" Steve asks, ducking his head to catch Tony's eyes, and Tony realises with a start that he'd completely drifted off in his own head, because they're still standing outside the dorms, bags at their feet, waiting for Bucky and Rhodey to show and for Happy to pull up in the car.

"I'm fine," Tony croaks, carefully not looking at Steve, because he can't guarantee what his face might look like if he does. "Sorry, just distracted."
Steve nods, not looking convinced. There's something almost sad about him, an aura of unhappiness that makes Tony want to hug the stuffing out of him and make him spill whatever's bothering him. It's not a healthy thought, especially considering that while, yeah, Tony had sort of accepted that he was kind of maybe a little bit in love with him, Steve certainly hadn't given him the slightest indication that he might be amenable to the interest, let alone return it. Granted, he'd become much friendlier in training, and fuck, they make a good team, but other than that he'd just--Steve, tall, strong, sure, dependable Steve. Who somehow finds it in himself to be genial with Tony even when Tony's privately convinced Steve will be all kinds of relieved when he doesn't have to be any longer.

Which is fine. It's completely fine, no skin off Tony's nose, no, sir. It's perfectly, utterly fine.

Bucky arrives at last, slouching closer and dumping a carryall no bigger than Steve's on top of the pile of their stuff. Tony squints at it.

"Seriously, do you guys have trouble understanding the concept of a month away from home?"

Bucky shares a quick look with Steve, which doesn't go unnoticed because Tony can be observant when he puts his mind to it, and when the subjects are interesting, and in this case they're both. He also doesn't miss the tiny shake of Steve's head at Bucky.

Tony doesn't like mysteries.

"Okay, what's going on? Are you guys allergic to shopping or something? Did you just, I don't know, throw a couple boxers in the bag and leave home for good?"

Even as his mouth shapes itself around the words, his brain is blaring ALERT, ALERT in the background. Tony, never in possession of the smoothest of brain-to-mouth filters, only catches up to it after he sees both their faces smooth out into blankness.

"Leave home," he'd said.

"Allergic to shopping," he'd said.

He's a fucking tool. No wonder Steve can't stand him. He hadn't even stopped to think about what kind of cash these guys made, if they made any at all. Though, Steve's a World Record Holder at 1500m now, surely he'd have sponsors and shit? And Bucky didn't do half-bad himself at the Trials--but they're still wearing the StarkSuits, which they wouldn't if they'd gotten a deal from Speedo or one of those other clowns. Fucking hell, what else has Tony been missing?

"Right, whatever, here's the deal. As of right fucking now the both of you are being sponsored by Stark Industries--no, shut up, shut it, I don't want to hear it. You're a fucking World Record holder, Steve, and Buck, you finished top of the lot in the mid-distance events. Rhodey's already sponsored by the US Air Force, so I can't sign him up, but the two of you are going to model my suits, and you're going to win. Okay?"

"Tony," Steve starts, sounding harassed, "you can't just throw money at things. There's a reason Buck and I turned down the other sponsors."

"Look, I don't want you on contract. I don't want you promising to swim for me for the next decade. I want Stark Industries to be all over this Olympics. We have an office in London, and I want all the business I can get out of this. What better way to make sure of this than to sponsor the best fucking swimmers on the team? Myself included, of course."

"Of course," Bucky says, amused. His eyes are calculating when they pass between Tony and
Steve, and Tony has the not-altogether-unfamiliar urge to keep talking until Bucky's distracted, because that look? Fairly screams "Danger, Will Robinson." He most emphatically does not need Bucky on his case about Steve. Just, fuck, no.

Bucky and Steve share a look now, one of those wordless conversations that Tony isn't at all envious about. Steve raises his eyebrows, and Bucky shrugs.

"Okay, Stark. You're on. We'll take your money. You'd better be prepared to get your ass kicked in the pool, though."

"Like you could," Tony counters, grinning wolfishly. "Cool, let me call up Marketing, we'll get you set up. And as soon as we get to London, you two are going shopping, and I'll be driving."

For some reason, Steve and Bucky both look horrified at the prospect. Tony's grin widens. This is going to be fun.

---

It isn't fun. It isn't fun at all. What it is is pure undiluted torture. Because yeah, okay, dragging both Steve and Bucky down to New Bond Street (thank you, Pepper) had been an utter delight, as had been watching them balk at the designer shops before Tony had tackled them both inside.

The look in the shop assistants' eyes when they'd seen the two of them had been somewhat less gratifying. As had been watching them get their hands on their bodies. Bucky had eaten it all up and gone back for more. Steve...

Tony had never seen anyone look so uncomfortable in his life. But then, after the shop assistants had bullied him in a changing room, and he'd come out of it... well.

Well.

That had been around the time when Tony had admitted to himself that staying to watch the fittings may have been a mistake. Which is really very strange, because he sees Steve in practically nothing on a daily basis. It isn't easy, but he'd somehow trained himself to pretend to be more or less unaffected. So why seeing Steve in tailored pants and a dress shirt should have that effect is extremely baffling. Still, there's no denying that Tony... does not remain unaffected. At all.

Steve adjusts the fit of his pants. Tony crosses his legs in a hurry.

A shop assistant runs his greedy mitts over Steve's back, straightening his shirt. Tony wants to punch him in the face with extreme prejudice.

Then Bucky, who's been fidgeting with the new phone he bought for himself the moment the SI money had come through, stalks over, grinning to himself, and shows Steve something on the screen that makes Steve's entire face light up. It makes something painful squeeze in Tony's chest, because whatever that is can't be anything that has to do with him.

"Tell her yes," Steve says eagerly, looking down at his old, battered watch that Tony is just itching to upgrade for a newer, better model, but can't because it's far from his place. (It's a novel sensation, reining himself in, letting that stop him. He can't say he likes it overmuch.) "At four o'clock?"
Bucky nods and types quickly, hitting send. The reply is almost instantaneous. "We're on," Bucky says, grinning, and then the two of them turn to look at Tony in extremely creepy unison.

"What?" Tony demands defensively.

"We're gonna meet a friend after this," Steve explains. The way he says 'friend', warm, delighted, leaves Tony unpleasantly cold. "You can come with us, if you like, or..."

He trails off, and fuck, Tony gets the hint, okay. It's not like they're surgically attached to his hip, for fuck's sake, they're free to come and go as they like. And that's fine, too.

"Nah, 's all right," he says, carefully unconcerned. "I got some work to do at the office, anyway. Important CEO stuff, you know how it is, oh, wait, you don't, consider yourselves lucky."

It's... maybe a little bitter, which is all kinds of not okay, and he hates himself viciously for the way Steve's face falls, but it's that or tag along to whatever rendez vous they have planned, and Tony has never liked being a third wheel.

"Sure, Tony," Steve says, looking away. "Thanks for taking the time to bring us here."

"No problem," Tony says, avoiding Bucky's narrowed eyes and pretending to be engrossed in this amazingly interesting thing on his phone.

When it's time to leave, he doesn't ask where they're going, instead walking off in the direction of the side street where he'd stashed the DB9 the London office keeps for him. He slides in the leather seat, lets his head thump back against the backrest. He's an idiot. It's not like he doesn't know that, but it's not like he could change it, either. Instead, he pulls out his phone and dials Pepper.

"I thought you were introducing Rogers and Barnes to the wonders of fine tailoring," Pepper says when she picks up. There's soothing music in the background, the clink of glasses and knives and forks against plates.

"Yes, well. They had an appointment."

"Oh, yes? Who with?"

"I didn't ask," Tony bites back.

The silence on the other end stretches a little longer than he's comfortable with.

"Right, well," Pepper says at last, when Tony's considering checking whether the connection is still holding. "Jarvis and I are having lunch. Did you want to come over?"

Oh, god, their eagle-eyed stares on him is the last thing Tony needs. "No, you know what, that's okay. I'll be at the office, call me if something comes up."

He hangs up before she can point out that he was the one who'd insisted they all take a vacation from work. Besides, what else is he supposed to do? He doesn't know a single soul in London that doesn't work for him, or isn't one of their group of six. He's never even been here before; if he's honest with himself, he's maybe been avoiding England altogether because of its part in keeping Howard's interest so much better than his own son. He can't stand the thought of going back to the penthouse, the same place Howard used to stay with his second wife when they lived here; being all alone in that place is not good for the lightness of Tony's disposition. He can't wander the streets, because he has no idea where he'd be going. The only sane, sensible option is going to work, really, and while Tony hates taking the sensible option in general, the only other alternative
is taking a turn inside the nearest bar and not crawling out until the small hours, and the one thing he is never, ever prepared to let either Steve or Bucky see is him drunk when he can't mind his big damn mouth. That would be a disaster.

He starts the car, enjoying the quiet purring of the engine, just for that second feeling at peace with the world. Then he types the London office coordinates in the GPS and pulls away from the curb, and doesn't blink for a very, very long time.

---

It's nearing eight when he gets back to the penthouse that evening, tired and irritable and sick of the deference he doesn't feel he deserves. And they were all so polite at him; Tony doesn't know what to do with all that amiability. It's bizarre. At least with straightforward pandering, he knows what to do. This is somehow harder to ignore and dismiss.

There's noise coming from the living room, and he makes his way down the hall to find Steve's long, solid frame sprawled full-length on top of the sofa, laughing quietly at Stephen Fry seated in front of some huge multi-colored crosshairs thing on the wall behind him. Just as he steps inside the room, Fry says, "It's pouring with rain. Can you give me a good reason why I should crouch down with my bottom in the air?"

The sound of thunder fills the room, coming from the buzzer of a large, bejewelled woman apparently called Jo, who is invited to answer.

"Stephen, I wouldn't have thought you'd need a good reason," Jo says, and while Fry is hiding his face in his hands and laughing, Tony watches, fascinated, as Steve follows suit, exploding in what could only be called a fit of giggles and hiding his own face in a cushion.

"Jesus, Jo," Steve mumbles, wiping at his own eyes as Fry blushes on screen.

Tony can't look away.

He must make some noise or other, because Steve jumps and whirls on the sofa.

"Tony," he says, startled, face flaming. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I only just did," Tony says dazedly, reeling with the way the deep pink in Steve's cheeks is making his heart beat alarmingly fast.

The people on the screen laugh loudly, and Steve scrambles for the remote, turning the volume off. Oppressive silence fills the large room, and Tony watches Steve fidget, cheeks still flushed.

"Are you on your own?" Tony asks at last, because the place really is very quiet -- too quiet.

"Yeah," Steve admits, biting at his lower lip. It's terribly distracting. "Bucky went out with Peggy and the rest of the lads, and Rhodey said he had a date."

Tony raises his eyebrows at that, because wow, go Rhodey, that was fast, but something else catches his attention first. "So why aren't you out with Peggy and Bucky and the lads? They're the same guys you trained with, aren't they? There isn't another Peggy you've been hiding?"
Steve grins. "No, there's only one Peggy. Don't think the world could handle another one. But, well, honestly? I'm not much for partying. They went dancing, and--it would have been a terrible mistake to let me out on the dance floor. I got two left feet out of the water."

It really shouldn't be so endearing, imagining Steve being a giant awkward puppy on the dancefloor, but hey, at this point Tony can't really rouse himself to be surprised by anything to do with the guy.

"You should have some fun too, though," he says, wondering what he could possibly put together to make that wistful look disappear from Steve's face.

Steve smiles wryly. "That's a kind thought, but I wouldn't have had fun if I'd gone with them. I'm quite boring, as I'm sure you suspected. I have fun walking around the city, not holed up in a smoky club where I can't hear myself think, and that's no one else's idea of fun."

Well, fuck that, Tony thinks.

"Let's go."

Steve blinks, pausing with his hand mid-way to his mouth. "Go where?"

"Come on. You and me. Yeah, come on, best idea ever. Let's go walking."

Steve starts smiling, though Tony can see he's fighting it every step of the way. "Tony, what are you talking about?"

"Come on, lazypants. Let's go walking. It's still light outside, it'll stay light for at least another hour, maybe longer. Let's go for a walk. Maybe you can show me some of those places you love so much."

Yeah, that thing that's happening to Steve's face right now? Tony's not sure his heart can take it. Steve's eyes sparkle when he looks out of the window at the slanting light, and god, it's killing Tony to see how much he wants to. Tony wonders with a sharp jab somewhere in the middle of his chest whether Steve's hesitating because he'd rather go with anyone but Tony. He's actually opening his mouth to tell Steve to forget it, it's fine, Tony's got work anyway, he just remembered, when Steve grins, that full-out smile that makes Tony forget how to breathe.

"Yeah," Steve says quietly, then louder, "Yeah. Sure. Let's go walking, Tony. Oh, man, there's so many things I want to show you."

It's a crystal-clear moment, hanging motionless in time, when Tony realises that, hell, that's it. He's done for. He's completely gone for this man. And when Steve moves on, as he inevitably will -- because really, what has Tony got to offer him that Steve might want? -- the aftermath might just kill him.

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The light changes slowly, bathing the sky in pink and purple and bronze, touching flighty fingers to the tops of the glass towers that line both banks of the Thames, stretching tall towards the clouds. It fades, shade by shade, as he and Steve follow the pathway along the Embankment, weaving their way around the multitude similarly engaged, young and old couples with their arms around each
other, the stray mother pushing a stroller, the evening crowd on their way home from work, taking
the scenic route. It's warm enough that Tony's thin leather jacket is more than enough cover, and
Steve's out in his shirt sleeves, a pale blue that makes his eyes into deep pools of blue that Tony
might just fall into if he isn't careful. Steve walks with his back straight, savouring the freshness of
the breeze that drifts in from the sea, ruffling the long blond strands of his hair, a faint smile
hovering over his mouth that Tony wants to kiss so badly it's an ache in his gut.

Because that's not something that will be welcome, well, ever, Tony contents himself with
watching Steve out of the corner of his eye, memorising the picture of peaceful happiness that he
presents like this, strolling the stone sidewalks, ducking in and out of shortcuts, back streets that
Tony never would have known were there. Tower Bridge--well, towers in the distance, outlined in
a hundred lights across the dimming darkness of the sky, so very beautiful that Tony almost trips a
few times, mesmerised. The warmth of Steve's hand at his elbow jolts through him, up his arm like
a streak of lightning, gone as quickly as it tore through his insides and curled in his chest.

"That's St Paul's Cathedral," Steve explains, pointing out a gorgeous building across the river, all
smooth curves that glow with an inner illumination. London in the evening is already more than
Tony thinks he can handle.

Steve seems to like it when Tony is caught by the city, and so Tony talks, says, "Oh, wow," and
"Look at that dome," and "good god, those lights are spectacular," and every single time Steve's
eyes crinkle a little Tony chalks it up as a win, hoards the moments when it's just the two of them,
leaning side by side on the stone parapet over the water and watching the lights come on on the
other side, elbows touching only slightly, enough for the heat of Steve's body to seep through the
leather and warm Tony all over. It's... magical. No other word for it. Tony thinks he could stay
here, like this, forever.

Maybe, just maybe, London isn't as bad as Tony always thought. Maybe (it's a big maybe, okay,
but, it's possible that) Howard might have been onto something, moving over here for so long.

Thoughts of Howard had been inevitable from the second Tony boarded the plane, and he's kind of
proud of himself that he still hasn't had a sulking fit after having been here for a couple of days.
With Steve, though, more of a legacy to Howard than Tony himself could ever be, Tony is finding
a strange kind of peace with all this, with the angry kid still inside him, aching and furious with
these emotions he neither wants nor needs. Steve talks, and Tony listens, and after a while, Steve
forgets whom he's talking to and starts telling stories of Howard, of the group of misfits he put
together, of Dum Dum and Gabe and Morita, of Peggy, of Bucky and him working their way into
the group with sweat, elbow grease and blind determination; of that group closing around them and
never letting go -- until their mentor's death tore them apart in a way they never quite recovered
from. Tony knows some of this from the article in this month's GQ that he has been furtively
reading and, uh, memorising, but hearing Steve say it, live, so to speak, gives the story a kind of
vivacity that words on paper could never evoke. Steve has quite the way with words, Tony is
discovering, and listening to him speak--well. It's very close to the first time Tony clapped eyes on
a circuit board, or held a pair of swimming goggles in his hands. It's almost like discovering what
was missing from his life even when he hadn't known to look for it at all.

It's very late when Steve stops and looks down at Tony, so late it's early. The night is black ink
around them, in the dip between two ancient buildings in the middle of the brightest lights. It's a
stolen moment, when Steve looks at him with that strange, unreadable emotion in his eyes, so close
that Tony's breath tangles in his chest.

"Thanks," Steve murmurs, blinking, long lashes obscuring his eyes.
"For what?" Tony whispers back.

Steve's mouth quirks in one corner, and he looks down, self-deprecating when he replies, "For indulging me. I know it's not your thing. I know you'd much rather have gone with Bucky, but I never gave you that choice."

"I didn't want to go with Bucky," blurs Tony. His tongue feels too big for his mouth, awkward.

Steve smiles a little, and there's something wrong with that smile but Tony can't work out what exactly, he just knows it hurts to see it.

"Well, thanks anyway. I had a great time."

Tony swallows, has to do it again so his throat will work. "My pleasure," he says, and fuck, he shouldn't have used that word, because now all he can think about is drawing Steve close by the collar of his shirt and pressing his lips to Steve's parted ones, finding out just what they taste like.

And then Steve steps back, and just like that the moment fractures between them, gone like the darkness around them when they round the corner into a large square teeming with people and light.

Tony licks his lips, follows Steve, and folds that instant out of time, secrets it away with the rest of the seconds he's been gathering like a greedy king gathers jewels, knowing that in the end, all he'll have left is their cold, unfeeling glint, no likeness at all, nothing but a pale imitation of blue so much deeper than the brightest sapphire.

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28th July, and at last it's time to get down to business. Tony's relieved. Really. He doesn't miss long walks through Hyde Park, wandering through Soho and accosting every second-hand bookshop they came across, strolling the leafy streets of what he's been reliably informed is Bloomsbury, a neighbourhood that at one time housed some of the most influential writers of the 20th century. It's perfectly fine. It's good to spend less time with Steve, really good to no longer be mesmerised by the glint of sunlight that turns Steve's hair to spun gold, the flash of straight white teeth when he smiles, the silly sunglasses and even sillier faces that Steve sports when he's comfortable enough to show them.

He especially doesn't miss getting caught in surprise freak showers that leave both of them soaked and Steve's shirt clinging to his skin like it's loathe to let go.

He needs to stop thinking about this. It's that or go mad. Because he knows full well that at the end of the next couple of weeks, Steve, Bucky, too, will be household names in America, champions, and they'll have their pick of all the best things in the world. 'Best' is not an adjective often applied to the things Tony can offer anyone who isn't a business associate. He should start getting used to the thought now, because god knows it's going to be hard enough to reconcile to it later, when it's actually happening.

The first few days are a welcome return to a routine. Tony gets lost in the familiar rhythm of a meet, waking up early, stretching, warm-up, making it to the Aquatics Centre in time to raid the coffee shop on his way in, finishing the last dregs of caffeine while he gets changed. Once he's in the pool, all his nerves disappear, as well as the rest of the world -- nothing else exists but the rush
of water in his ears, a fitting accompaniment to his pounding heartbeat. Three strokes, breathe, three strokes, breathe, it's the only rhythm that makes sense to him some days, and it lulls Tony into a false sense of security.

Having trained with Steve for all this time, he is not expecting what happens when it's time for Steve's first race. Tony's sitting in the stands, iPod earbuds in and trip-hop blaring in his ears, tapping away at a tablet when he chances to look up, just in time for the swimmers to appear. Here comes Steve, tall and fucking breathtaking in his Stark tracksuit, the strap of his carryall tight over acres of muscled chest. It's the blue, red and white that Tony had designed, and yeah, okay, so seeing his design all over Steve maybe gives him a fierce burst of satisfaction that he's not sure it's okay to feel. But it's there, undeniable, the big, multi-layered circle with the star in the middle, it looks... good on Steve. Possibly too good.

Steve strips out of the top and pants a moment later, and he's left in just the skin-molding swimsuit that Tony also designed, officially for the team but in reality for that man right there, standing still and proud with a focused expression on his face, a faraway look in his eyes. It's a compelling sight, all that concentration; Tony spends a long moment wistfully imagining what it must be like to be the subject of it, for Steve Rogers to ignore the world around him just because you're standing in front of him.

Before Tony knows it, they're stepping up to the edge of the pool, and Steve's adjusting his goggles, and bending over in preparation to launch himself into the water, and, well.

Tony, extremely nonchalantly, moves his tablet to his lap, crosses his legs. Then he forgets all about inconvenient boners because the signal sounds and they're off, Steve a long line of speed moving through the water like lightning, effortless. Tony's on his feet and cheering before he knows what the hell he's doing, yelling himself hoarse as Steve leaves every one of the competition behind, almost an entire length in front of the nearest swimmer. It's the 1500m race, and it's more of a waiting game than anything else, but, as Tony had noted from the start, not only is Steve inhumanly fast, he also has the endurance of a marathon swimmer. Tony wonders dazedly if next Olympics he could convince Steve to swim the 10 mile race, shuts down the spike of bitterness that tells him that in four years' time he very likely won't have a single thing to say that Steve will find of any relevance to himself.

Turn, and there Steve goes, the allowed 15m underwater going by in a flash of muscles and determination. It's no competition by that point; everyone can see that Steve is going to be the winner of the race by more than a fair margin. As expected, several turns later, Steve finishes two lengths before the nearest swimmer, with a final push that leaves Tony completely breathless. Steve bobs in the water, chest heaving, lifting his goggles and turning to look at the scoreboard that's flashing WR in big, bold white letters. He broke the world record that he set himself a month ago. Tony maybe needs to sit down.

But then Steve whirls around in the water, face split into a blinding grin, and he looks straight at Tony like he knew Tony was there all along, and Tony is helpless to stop his face responding, flashing back a smile just as wide, such a far cry from inconspicuous that it might as well be a scream. Steve actually waves at him, the dork, and Tony finds himself laughing, mouthing "Nice" at him, giving him a thumbs up that he wouldn't have been caught dead doing under any circumstances back in the States. What is Steve doing to him?

Tony hardly gets to leave the Aquatics Centre now, because if he's not swimming, it's Rhodey in the water, or Bucky, or the ladies, whom Tony wishes he'd taken the time to get to know better but cheers for nonetheless, because it's somehow easier to let go, cut loose, when he's halfway across the world from a place that would have judged him for it. Besides, when they're not all in the water
it becomes a habit for the four of them to gather in the stands and watch the other events, Bucky yelling himself hoarse every time there's a US swimmer in the heats -- a few times when there are British swimmers competing, too. A large, heavy-set guy almost gets Steve once, in one of the distance events, and Bucky whoops delightedly, clapping madly.

"That's Dum Dum Dugan," he tells Tony when he's sat his ass down again and stopped embarrassing himself without a care in the world. "He's a badass swimmer. Steve better watch his back." He looks perfectly happy with that, though, like the chance of Steve losing is somehow okay.

Tony's not a stupid man by any stretch of the imagination, so why it takes him so long to catch up to what's going on, he can't for the life of him explain. Fact of the matter is, Steve and Bucky are both competitive, driven swimmers. But... but they're not the kind of people who close themselves off, get in the zone without acknowledging the other swimmers around them. No, they chat, they smile, they shake hands. Winning is good, but losing--isn't the end of the world for them. It's a chance to train harder, do better the next time.

It's a viewpoint that Tony has never been exposed to in his life. He's maybe beginning to understand Steve and Bucky's issues with sponsors, with the relentlessly bullying culture of professional competitive swimming, to win win win or go home.

It makes it somehow okay that he finishes second in the 400m IM final, makes it okay when he gets silver instead of gold, which would have been his life over four years ago.

The other thing that makes it okay is that he loses to Rhodey, which, if there's a guy more deserving of beating him, Tony would like to see that perfect specimen of mankind sometime.

The thing that helps most of all, though, is that after Tony has grabbed Rhodey in a crushing hug, he turns around, and there's Steve in the stands, standing, hands red from clapping, and the look in his eyes makes Tony's heart stutter painfully in his chest, because the last time he saw so much pride in someone's eyes was before his mother died. Bucky's standing at Steve's shoulder, too, grinning fit to burst; he drops Tony a two-fingered salute while Rhodey is getting ready to receive his gold, and yeah. Yeah. Tony can do this. He can do this when Steve hasn't looked away from him once, eyes crinkling in the corners, warm and fond. They are the best friends Tony has ever had besides Rhodey and Pepper, and god, it's going to hurt when they walk away from him.

Rhodey is glowing at the top of the podium, one arm tight around Tony's shoulders as they hold up their medals for the cameras, and Tony realises with a strange, aching rush that he has never felt happier in his life. There are photographers aplenty even after the ceremony, when Steve and Bucky push their way through the crowd to congratulate their teammates; there is one instance when Steve stands before Tony, still in his Team US tracksuit, and Tony can't even fight the way he can feel his face softening, the smile that's stretching his lips becoming smaller, realer. Then Bucky claps his shoulder and the moment breaks, thank god, because the blood is pounding in Tony's ears, and there's a feeling of dread curling inside his gut, the knowledge that he's going to have to rein all that in or he's going to look like an absolute idiot later when Steve gives him the Let's Stay Friends speech. He swallows dryly and resolves to do just that from now on.

Of course, it's never that easy, because this is Tony's life, and 'easy' is a state of affairs that happens to other people.

First, there's the Women's 400m IM final that afternoon. Tony had skipped the heats because he'd been coming out of the water at that point, back in the changing rooms, but the final is a couple of hours after his and Rhodey's win, and he's freshly changed and back on the stands, while Rhodey romances the reporters outside in the sunshine. Bucky and Steve have their heads together,
conferring furiously and pointing out various swimmers. They don't stop when Tony gets there, merely nod at him distractedly.

"Evans has a better underwater technique," Steve says worriedly, narrowing his eyes at the Australian finalist who is tucking her long hair under her cap. Bucky hums, chewing on his bottom lip.

"She's got a better turn than Evans, though, and a better breathing control than Leverenz."

"Who are we talking about here?" Tony butts in, because it clearly isn't Caitlin from the US team.

"Peggy Carter," Bucky tells him, and a lightbulb goes off in Tony's head. Ah. He must be some kind of idiot, because he hadn't even thought that of fucking course Peggy would be here, and competing; and of course Bucky and Steve would be rooting for her. He runs his eyes over the line-up, seeking out dark curls and brown eyes, straining to see over the distance before he once again realises he's an idiot and looks for the English flag instead, up on the giant screen on the far end of the building. Margaret Carter for England, it says, lane six. He looks back at the pool.

There she is, tall, toned, with curves that catch the eye and make a person's mouth run dry. She has stripped down to her suit already, goggles hanging from a strap around her neck, jumping lightly on the balls of her feet and circling her shoulders, getting ready to hit the water. She's not looking around, which isn't surprising, but the way Steve and Bucky's eyes are boring a hole through her head Tony wouldn't be shocked if she turned and told them to look the hell away.

The warning signal sounds, and the women get up on the edge of the pool, assume positions. The second they're off, Bucky and Steve are on their feet, cheering as loud as they can, yelling Peggy's name. Tony knows full well she can't hear them in the water, but if she could, he has no doubt that it would spur her on.

She turns, and Steve's "Go, Peggy," rends the air, making Tony look away from him decisively. He's just cheering on a friend. Tony shouldn't read anything into it. It's none of his business, anyway, if Steve has a thing for Peggy that never went away, even after he quit England for the States again. He looks back at the pool, and he doesn't mean to get caught into the rush of the competition, but he can't really help it, watching these amazing athletes throw everything they are, all their years of preparation into that one swim. Peggy is beautiful in the water, flawlessly graceful, a long line of muscle and skin and bones, a perfect shape sliding under the surface. Tony can see why these two have taken to her.

It's very, very close -- half-a-second close, but the repeat shows again and again Peggy's long fingers reach the wall of the pool ahead of Evans', Leverenz taking the bronze. Steve and Bucky are going wild, and further along the seats, a group of about ten people are on their feet, yelling their heads off. Tony recognises Dugan in the middle of it, sitting between a blond woman with bright red lipstick and a tall, fine-boned man with perfectly coiffed hair and the thinnest mustache Tony has ever seen. Somehow he pulls it off, looking refined rather than like a dick.

"Come on, let's go say hello," Steve says, tugging at the sleeve of Tony's shirt, drawing his attention back to his and Bucky's manic grins.

Tony would rather walk barefoot over the Arizona desert at noon. "You guys go," he tries, feigning interest in his phone, but Steve will have none of it; he and Bucky hook an arm each through his and tug him away from the stands, rushing down the steps.

They have to wait, of course, until Peggy comes out of the pool and receives the congratulations due to her, but after that she turns and looks around, as if feeling the two men's eyes boring into the
"Peggy!" Steve yells, waving a manic arm. "Peggy, over here!"

She sees them at last, grins just as widely, rushes over and throws herself around Steve's neck, feet dangling because, well. Steve's a giant. Steve doesn't bat an eyelash, picks her up and twirls her, laughing loudly.

"Come on, stop monopolising her," Bucky complains, tugging at Steve's arms around her waist; she turns, throws an arm over Bucky's shoulders and pulls him close, enclosing him in the circle of their arms. They're laughing, all three of them, a little mad, so excited it's contagious. Tony doesn't want to find it endearing, but let's face it. He's fighting a losing battle. Steve's eyes are bright, face open and happy; the muscles in his arms stand out to balance Bucky and Peggy when they sway and almost bear the three of them to the ground.

"Congratulations, you deserve it," Steve says when they separate at last, beaming down at her; she winks at him, says "Bloody right I do." Tony finds himself liking her despite himself.

Then she turns and fixes him with a direct, intrigued look. "And who's this, then? On, no, don't tell me. Mr Tony Stark, if I'm not very much mistaken?"

Tony nods, sticks his hand out, drawls, "The one and only. Pleasure."

She takes his hand in a firm grip, looks him up and down (Tony's shocked to see they're almost the same height). "Knew your father, but of course you're well aware of that already. Can't say I liked him much, but he sure taught me how to win."

"Yeah, he was good at that," Tony says, not missing the way Steve flinches a little at the mention, looks down at him with cautious eyes, which, what, does he think Tony has the manners of a caveman and he's going to maul his girlfriend down or something? "Looks like you learned your lesson well."

She looks at him another moment, the same penetrating stare, and then she smiles, full lips stretching to reveal charmingly uneven teeth. "You should come dancing with us next time," she tells him, hooking her arm through Bucky's, who grins at her. "You might even tempt Steve to join in, god knows that's a task and a half."

Tony looks up at Steve, whose cheeks are flaming, which is strange enough that he almost misses the sly, loaded look that passes between Peggy and Bucky. Oh, he sees how it is. Well, sure, he'll deliver Steve to their night out, if that's what is required of him. Clearly they want Steve there badly enough to cheat, even though Tony has no idea why they think he's the one to whom Steve will listen.

Peggy is carted off by the media after that, and Bucky runs off to get ready for a heat, so it's he and Steve that are left by the side of the empty pool, Steve's cheeks still much too pink. Tony fidgets a little, figures he's got nothing to lose, really, by asking, opens his mouth--and closes it again, looking away. The shameful truth is, he doesn't want to be faced with the reality of it, of Steve's feelings for Peggy, his hopes for a future now that he's going to be a world-famous swimmer with all the options that were denied him before. The silence between them is frayed, awkward, the way it hasn't been for months. It's kind of good that Tony knows which direction the wind is blowing now; sure, it fucking cuts straight through him, but it's better to know now, better to be prepared.

"So I'm gonna head back to the penthouse," Tony mumbles, looking at Steve's strong, muscled throat because he can't quite bring himself to look all the way up, see the relief that's bound to be
there in Steve's eyes.

"Oh," Steve says, and huh, that's--

"Sorry, did you want to do something?" Tony asks hurriedly, stupidly hopeful that he's right, that's regret he just heard in Steve's voice -- but then Steve shrugs, swallows, says, "No, no, that's fine, I'll catch a cab back with Bucky, maybe we can take Peggy out for a drink," and Tony smiles wryly to himself and his ridiculous wishful thinking.

They say their goodbyes and Tony walks away, grits his teeth and swallows. It's fine. It's all fine.

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The second thing doesn't even have the grace to wait a couple days to blindside Tony. No, the powers that be clearly think Tony's not had enough problems of recent, because the paper that Jarvis leaves with the bag of croissants that he drops off for breakfast the next morning doesn't get lost or burnt or doused in orange juice. It's perfectly clean and crisp, clearly read but meticulously refolded, when Tony staggers out of his bedroom, morning free but for a light training session in an hour's time, and settles himself at the breakfast table, pours himself a black coffee while he unfolds it.

Peggy Carter takes up the front page of the Sports section, as of course she should, and Tony spends a moment perusing the editorial: championed at an early age by the legendary Howard Stark blah blah, working for the same foundation that raised her and provided swimming lessons for her and other orphans in a similar position, blah blah, close friends with American medal hopefuls James Barnes and Steve Rogers, the recent World Record breaker at 1500m.... Tony flips the page away from Carter's achingly beautiful face, folds the paper in half and looks over the rest of yesterday's swimming news, past Rhodey's triumphantly raised arms, the two of them with their arms around each other on the podium--

Oh, fuck.

The World Record Holder And The Son Of The Legend Who Created Him: Steve Rogers and Tony Stark

Underneath the terribly cheesy heading lies a picture that makes Tony's blood run hot and cold at the same time. There they are, himself and Steve, caught in a frame after Tony's loss yesterday, standing very close together, grinning stupidly into each other's eyes, Tony still wet from the pool and Steve looking perfect in his white, blue and red tracksuit, blond hair painstakingly combed to the side, every inch the American hero.

In a surprising turn of events, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Record holder and Gold Medalist Tony Stark got ousted from the top spot on the tier, whence he was undoubtedly headed. James Rhodes, displaying remarkable discipline and furious determination, out-swam the reigning champion to claim his place in the hall of fame in this year's Olympic Games. Rhodes, 24, came out of nowhere and took Stark down a peg, swimming beautifully to achieve a time of 4:03:80, beating Stark's previous Olympic Record by 0.04 seconds. Stark swam a fraction slower, showing a time of 4:03:89, 0.05 seconds behind Rhodes.

Stark did not appear disappointed, instead embracing his long-time training partner on the dais,
and was then congratulated by the rest of his teammates -- including current World Record holder, Steve Rogers, 23. Rogers, much like Rhodes, came out of nowhere in this Olympic Games to blow away the competition, dashing the sceptics' predictions.

Rogers and Stark have a history together that is played out entirely by proxy -- this reporter has learned that they had not met prior to 2009, when Stark was drafted into the US Swimming Olympics programme. Our sources say that the relationship between the two men got off to a dire start, when Rogers mistakenly accused Stark of taking advantage of Rogers' lifelong friend, James Barnes, 23. It appears, however, that they have reconciled their differences coming into this Olympics; one can't help but wonder what else their relationship may evolve into.

"Oh, god, Steve has seen this," is the only thing that runs through Tony's mind when his brain has absorbed the words, a litany of "fuck" bringing up the rear -- because of course he has. Of course he has, it's not like Tony can get a fucking break here, god. His heart stutters in his throat when he wonders what Steve will say when he sees him next, how he'll behave, the way he'll look at Tony now that it's obviously, blindingly clear how stupidly, pathetically enamoured Tony is of him. Fuck, everyone who even glances at that picture will see it. He's almost afraid to check his email and see what Pepper has to say about this.

A very, very small part of Tony, deep inside where he still hasn't managed to stifle it, hopes that Steve will say something. That Steve will look at this picture, and see how perfect they look together, and find it in himself to give Tony a chance at something more than friendship. As that part is clearly insane, Tony feels justified in ignoring it entirely (or at least valiantly trying to). Hopefully Steve, who can be utterly oblivious about the effect he has on people, will miss the whole thing altogether.

In fact, Steve says nothing. Nothing at all, not a word, not a glance out of place, although fucking Bucky more than compensates in the case of the latter, long, considering looks that make Tony's skin itch until he's certain he's coming out in hives. Bucky is gracious enough to not say anything, though, possibly in deference to the fact that they have to swim a fucking relay in a few hours, and if there was ever a bad time to bring something that explosive up, it's now. Still, Tony is grateful for small mercies. If that's the way things are going to be until this is all over and Steve and Bucky are released from the Stark Industries' contract, well, Tony can live with that. He can. It sure as hell beats the alternative.

The afternoon flies after that, aided and abetted by Pepper turning up with some work Jarvis had passed over, for the purpose of distracting Tony from his brooding, no doubt. She is, predictably, the best person in Tony's life ever, because the only remark she makes on the events of this morning is that he and Steve look very nice together, and Steve seems very taken with him, which, while patently false, at least gives Tony hope that he might avoid the mocking and sideways looks that are sure to follow.

He doesn't see anyone after that until the evening, which, if he's honest, does not help his paranoia any. The 4 x 100m freestyle relay is scheduled for eight o'clock, and by seven thirty Tony is giving the word 'antsy' a new definition. Fury is there, at the edge of the crowd, giving him an unimpressed one-eyed glare, and Coulson is standing a step behind his shoulder, in one of his ridiculous suits, eyes fastened to a tablet in his hands. He murmurs something to Fury, whose scowl deepens. Tony feels a shiver travel down his back; he's this close to praying for the others to turn up when he spots Steve's distinctive frame, a head above most of the other people in the place. Bucky's right behind him, carryall across his chest and bumping off his hip. He's got his hand in the crook of Steve's elbow and is talking quietly to him, eyes intense. Tony stamps down viciously on the unwanted spike of jealousy and yearning. This is so not the time.
"Where the fuck have you been?" he says desperately when they're close enough so he can scuttle to stand in front of them, their bulk hiding him from Fury's one-eyed stare of death. "Fury's going nuclear over there."

Steve shrugs, uncharacteristically quiet. Tony's stomach drops when Steve avoids his eyes, looking away towards the pool instead, where the other teams are getting ready to go. Tony looks at Bucky, hoping for a clue, but Bucky just shrugs, though his face is closed off.

"Seriously, what's going on?" Tony demands, starting to freak out a little. Is it him? Of course it's him, Steve has changed his mind and decided he is most emphatically not okay with being pimped as Tony Stark's boyfriend, and now he's wondering how to tell Tony he doesn't want anything to do with him anymore. Tony bites his lip, hoping to chomp down on his stupid desire to babble.

Then Bucky turns to where Steve's looking, and Tony, for lack of any better idea, follows. Turns out that the two of them are staring at the spot where the German team is stretching, all of them in ominous black suits that look almost like leather. Their leader is about as tall as Steve, his face flushed deeply with the heat and humidity inside the Centre, hair a violent red that gives Tony chills.

"Who's that guy?" he blurts.

Steve shudders lightly, turns away; he looks pale, which Tony hadn't noticed before.

"His name is Johann Schmidt. They call him the Red Skull. He's their lead-off, so you'd better watch your back, Tony," he says, voice thready.

Bucky curls his upper lip in disgust. "He's the nastiest piece-of-shit swimmer you'll ever go up against. He trained with Howard, too, for a couple of weeks. Howard threw him out at the end of them. About the only time your Pops and I saw eye to eye, apart from..." His eyes dart to Steve's unhappy, distracted face and away, and Tony gets the point. Yeah, he and his old man saw eye-to-eye about that, too, looks like.

"He's in the lane next to yours," Steve says quietly. "Be prepared. He's going to say some nasty shit to you, if he holds to type."

It's the first time Tony's heard Steve swear out loud, which tells him just how rattled he is under the calm exterior. Tony shrugs, trying to reassure him.

"I've had some crazy stuff said to me over the years. I'm sure I can handle him."

Steve's mouth twists in distress. "I wish you didn't have to," he murmurs, so low that Tony almost doesn't catch it.

"Hey," he says, stepping closer, close enough to have to tilt his head to look Steve in the eye. He ducks his head a little, catching his gaze. "Hey, it'll be okay. There's nothing he can say that I haven't heard already from someone else. It's fine. You know I don't care about that crap."

Steve looks down at him, blue eyes concerned. "Tony," he starts, but fuck, Tony doesn't want to hear anything he's going to say in that sad, regretful voice. Nope.

He steps away, turning a little to signal that the conversation is over, thanks. He narrows his eyes at Schmidt, who is looking in their direction with a nasty smirk on his face. If anything, Tony's glad that Steve doesn't have to stand next to him, waiting for the signal to sound. He can handle this stuff better than anyone else on the team. He's sure been doing it for longer.
"What's going on?" Rhodey butts in, once he's jogged over from the entrance.

"Asshole German team, apparently," Tony says, shrugging.

"Oh," Rhodey says, mocking. "One of those. Lovely."

"Yep. It'll be fine, we'll see who's laughing last when we kick their asses."

"That's the spirit," Rhodey says cheerfully, clapping his shoulder. "Now come on, we have to get ready, and you need a group hug."

"Aw, fuck no," Tony complains, because damn, he thought he'd outgrown Rhodey's need to make sure Tony knows people care for him. "I really don't."

"Shut up, Stark," Rhodey says, hooking an arm through his and tugging him into place. "Time to inaugurate Rogers and Barnes into the club."

"What? What did I miss?" Bucky pipes up, and Tony knows he hasn't a hope in hell of avoiding this now. Besides, Steve looks like he needs it way more than Tony, and while Tony has never been the best at accepting hugs, he's pretty good at giving them out. Rhodey catches his eye and winks. Devious bastard.

So it is that the four of them stand on the tiles above their lane, dressed in nothing but Tony's suits, looking at each other carefully. The US hasn't won a freestyle relay since Howard still swam, and this is bigger than them, bigger than Tony and his issues, and Steve and his stupid caring heart, and whatever the Germans have to say. This is the best team the US has seen in decades. They are winning this thing.

"Come here," says Rhodey then, throwing an arm around Tony's shoulders, the other around Bucky's. It's left for Tony to tentatively slide his arm around Steve's naked back, wrap his hand around the ball of Steve's shoulder, pull him in until their sides are touching and Tony can feel the weight of Steve's arm settle over his own shoulders, warm and reassuring, nothing but skin between them. Tony looks up, into eyes so very blue they make him want to drown in them and never surface.

"Okay, boys," Rhodey says, and Tony refocuses, takes in the other two men there with him, realises with a warm rush that he will never want to stand in this spot with anyone else but them. Bucky smiles at him eagerly from across; the tips of his fingers grasp Tony's on Steve's other side, and he pulls, bringing the four heads to meet in the middle.

"We got you, Tony," he says, and Steve and Rhodey nod. "We got your back. You just get us started, shoot us off on our way. This one is in the bag, guys."

"In the fucking bag," Rhodey echoes, and Steve grins, looking a lot more confident than a little while ago.

"I got you, guys," Tony tells them, because hell, he started this thing two years ago with no concept of even how one existed inside a team, only to end up here, with no memory of how he survived before this, the four of them.

"Good luck," Steve says, back in charge, solid and comforting and an anchor on which Tony can tether himself, always. Then Steve's head tilts just a touch, and his temple rests against Tony's, just for a moment, just enough for Tony to flood with a wonderful warmth that buoys him, helps him rise above the water.
The four of them pull apart simultaneously, like they have done this a thousand times, and Tony pulls on his goggles, tugs his cap over his hair, bounces a little, getting his muscles loosened. The other three are ready behind him, a united front, when Tony climbs to the starter spot and crouches, assuming position.

"Well, well," a heavily-accented voice floats from his right, thick with malicious satisfaction, "if it isn't the Stark screw-up. What would your father have said, boy, if he'd seen you fail yesterday? A silver medal is no result a Stark can live with; certainly your father wouldn't have put up with it."

Tony doesn't bother to look up or turn; instead, his mind pulls up the image of Steve's face yesterday, after Tony's supposed failure, beaming at him just as proudly as when he'd won the gold that first day, and you know what? This guy? His father? They can't even compare.

The starter siren goes off, and Tony dives without even bothering to reply, launches himself in the water and swims like he doesn't think he has ever swum before. His heart pounds in his ears with the rush of waves, and he counts in his head, one, two, three, breathe, push, turn, and he's headed back before he even realises he's reached the edge. He races for Bucky and Rhodey, for Steve, for himself; he races, because he doesn't know how not to be the best but it's all right when he isn't, it's okay, because even when he fails he still wins.

His fingers touch the edge of the pool and he feels more than sees Bucky's body arching over him, diving into the pool in his wake and powering through the water, showering him with splashes. He reaches to pull himself up, but strong arms catch his arms before he can lever himself out of the pool, and Steve braces him as Rhodey tugs on the other side, the two of them lifting him bodily out. He staggers a little, lungs heaving, as Rhodey takes his place quickly, ready for Bucky racing back. Then Rhodey dives in, and it's Tony's turn to help Bucky out of the water, catch him while Steve jumps up in his place, crouching, ready for when Rhodey turns. Tony can barely get his bearings, let alone look around, but Bucky crows in his ear when Steve leaps in over Rhodey, the first anchor in the water. Steve's massive shoulders flex, and he's fucking eating up the water, halfway down the pool before anyone else follows. Tony glances around to see Schmidt's face an even darker purple, mouth curled in a snarl as his teammates cower around him, and he wants nothing so much as to laugh at how idiotic he's behaving. Tony might not be manager of the year, but even he knows a thing or two about motivation, and this hardly cuts it.

Then he has no more time to feel sorry for the other team because here comes Steve, racing for them hell for leather, and for a long, surreal second Tony feels like Steve's racing for him, trying to get to him as fast as he can, and something rips open inside him and yearns. He buries it down as fast as he can, because god, they don't need another repeat of yesterday's paper, but god, he's going to have to grab hold of something so he doesn't race to the edge himself.

"Come on, Steve," Rhodey and Bucky roar, but Tony hardly hears them, eyes locked on the blur of muscle in the water coming ever closer. He couldn't speak if his life depended on it; luckily, he doesn't have to, because the whole Aquatics Centre is on their feet, roaring for Steve to go go go! And then he's there, a last push and Tony watches on the huge screen as Steve's long hand reaches the wall and presses itself to it, that's it, they're done, they've won this thing and they've gone down in history, too, because they have completely shattered the world record by almost a full second. The other swimmers are straggling up now, but that's immaterial because Rhodey and Bucky catch each of his arms and throw themselves in the pool with Steve, practically climbing on top of him with their exuberance. They don't let Tony's inadequacy issues cripple him as they always do; instead they tug him in and the four of them clutch at each other and laugh madly while the commentators are going beserk from the speakers in the walls.

"We did it," Bucky screams, way too loud for comfort but Tony doesn't care, he doesn't care, he
can let himself bask in the moment just this once, the four of them together, for what could be the last time.

When they drag themselves out of the water at last, Fury's standing right there, a massive grin splitting his face in half, his one eye narrowed almost shut with it. "Good job, fellas," he says, and Tony very seriously considers throwing him in the pool, ridiculous leather coat and all; but the others are shaking his hand, and then Coulson is beaming at them and doing the same, and Tony lets the moment pass just this once.

In four years' time, though, he won't be so magnanimous.

The next half hour passes in flashes of cameras, shouted questions, Pepper's crushing hug followed swiftly by Jarvis' equally bone-breaking and rather more tearful version, and then they're dressed and on the dais and holding up the medals hanging from straps over their necks, grinning fit to burst. Tony is standing between Rhodey and Steve, feeling on top of the fucking world, when something jars Rhodey and he tips, balancing himself against Tony's chest. He straightens, laughing and shoving lightly back at Bucky, but the damage is done; Tony stumbles backwards, right into Steve's chest, Steve's arm tightening around him automatically. He looks up. Steve looks down.

The noise, which Tony could have sworn could not get any louder, increases exponentially.

"Are you two an item?" a journalist shouts while the cameras keep flashing, and Steve's entire face flames when he hurriedly steps back, putting marked distance between them. Something squeezes in Tony's chest, hard; he feels his face fall, and recovers quickly, plastering his practiced smile firmly on top and shaking a finger playfully in the journalist's direction, even though he has no idea where she stands.

He doesn't remember much after that. Bucky drags all four of them and Pepper out, and they meet up with Peggy and some of the other British swimmers, and then there's drinking, though not for nearly long enough, as some of the people still have to compete tomorrow. Then they somehow get back to the penthouse without getting lost, and Tony wishes he could appreciate the way night-time London sparkles around them, as if in celebration, but he's too busy trying to forget the way Steve had looked, for that one moment before composing himself, almost horrified. And that's not a job that's easy to do without some serious drinking. So when they get back, he loads them all in the elevator, waves them off, ignores Bucky's demands to be told where he's going, and pulls out his phone.

"Jarvis, you up?" he says as soon as there's a faint click on the other end of the call connecting.

"For you sir? Always."

Tony absolutely doesn't sigh with relief. He has a day off from competing tomorrow, and he intends to take plenty of advantage.

"Get your coat, honey. We're going out."

---

From: rgreen@starkindustries.net
To: tstark@starkindustries.net  
Date: August 12, 2012 11:40  
Subject: Steve Rogers and James Barnes

Dear Mr Stark,

As per your instructions, the department is standing by to dissolve the current sponsorship arrangement with Mr Steve Rogers and Mr James Barnes. Please advise as to how we should proceed.

May I also extend the sincere congratulations of the entire department on your success at the Games.

Best regards,

Rod Green

Rod Green  
Marketing & PR  
Stark Industries  
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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Tony is drunk. Tony is drunk, and it's all Rod Green from Marketing's fault, him and that stupid email. The one thing he'd hoped never to subject Bucky and Steve to, and wouldn't you know it, here it is, him in all his inebriated glory. He'd managed to avoid them seeing him the last time, when he'd slunk off and commandeered one side of Jarvis' bed after the disaster that had been the relay win afterparty, but this time there's nowhere to hide. He's in the middle of the gigantic ballroom at Claridge's, surrounded by swankily dressed athletes and an army of sponsors gathered for the post-closing ceremony US Olympic Team Gala. Tony wouldn't be surprised if there are upwards of five hundred people milling about, going by how cramped the room feels.

There's a glass of scotch that has been surgically attached to his hand all night, currently half-empty. Tony's trying to resist knocking it back and getting another refill, but hey, what's the point, why the fuck not. It's not like he'll see Steve or Bucky much after tonight; he's going to email fucking Rod Green from fucking Marketing tomorrow morn--well, afternoon, more likely, and tell him to go ahead and set them free. They're famous enough now to not need Tony's help; it's time to let them get on with their future. They have all the options in the world now, and Tony knows when to bow out. Best to do it before it gets unpleasant and they're forced to explain to him that, much as they appreciate what he's done for them, they're moving on now. Tony's not stupid. No, he's a certified genius, thanks very much. He gets the picture.

He wanders the room by himself, unwilling to be trapped into a conversation with anyone, because right now he just can't muster the energy to sound coherent, and not like he'd like to crawl into a hole and not come out for a month. There's a devastatingly gorgeous redhead woman in a black
dress talking to Fury on one side of the room, with a serious expression on her face and a
dangerous glint in her eye; Fury looks to be enjoying himself immensely. The woman catches
Tony's eye and gives him a look that reaches all the way through him and out the other side. He
puts her firmly into the 'avoid' column, because she looks like she doesn't take to bullshit kindly,
and he's feeling just a touch too raw to pull off nonchalant right now. Further inside the room
there's a boisterous group of people who have attracted a crowd and appear to be re-enacting some
epic tale of their path to glory. They are all very tall and very well-built, and one of them looks like
an actual real-life Viking with his flowing blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Tony gives that group
a wide berth, too, which really speaks plenty about the state of him, he thinks wryly, because
normally he'd be right in the middle of the fray making eyes at all of them. Tonight, though...

"Mr Stark," someone says behind him, and he turns carefully -- wouldn't do to trip over his feet and
make even more of an idiot of himself. When he looks, though, it's only Coulson, observing him
evenly without the usual calculation behind his blue eyes.

"Oh, it's you," Tony returns cleverly. "What do you want?"

Coulson doesn't shrug, he's way too controlled for that, but he gives the impression that Tony's
brashness doesn't bother him one bit. "I came to say goodbye. I'm leaving tonight, and I won't see
you again until next month."

"Next month?" This is news to Tony.

Coulson's face does something complicated, vacillating between excitement and anticipation and a
little bit of dread. "I thought Coach Fury had talked to you about this already. There's... a team
we're putting together, on the same basis of your training regimen, since the four of you performed
so spectacularly -- which, congratulations, by the way, I don't think I ever said."

He offers Tony his hand, which Tony takes after a long, uncomprehending look at it. Coulson
doesn't seem offended. "Thanks," Tony says. Coulson smiles, and wow, Tony doesn't think he's
ever seen that expression on his face. It's a really nice smile.

"I'll let Coach Fury explain when he sees you next. Have a good trip back."

"You too," Tony says, but Coulson is already walking away. Another man peels out of the crowd
and falls into step with him. He's wearing a t-shirt and jeans, which by Coulson's long-suffering
expression isn't unusual. The man says something, and Coulson throws him an exasperated look,
tilting his head at the door. The man grins, and follows.

Tony wishes he could slip out that smoothly, but Bucky's bearing down on him like a Stark-
seeking missile, and there will be no escape.

"Where've you been?" he grumbles, snatching the drink from Tony's hand and throwing it back
over Tony's affronted squawk.

"I wasn't finished with that," he whines, but Bucky heartlessly ignores him, curling a hand around
his elbow.

"Let's go get you another one, then. Fuck, let's go get me another one."

"What's made you into this little ray of sunshine?"

Bucky scowls. "Fucking sponsors, man. They're like leeches. I don't want a lifetime supply of
cornflakes. I don't even like milk. Goddamn vampires."
Tony gapes at him. "Who doesn't like milk?" he asks, bewildered.

Bucky raises a scornful eyebrow at him. "This is what you retain from all this? I come to you for sympathy, and you mock my loathing of the white stuff?"

"It's cool and delicious," Tony protests, but Bucky has stopped listening to him at that point, and is looking around furtively. "Bar's that way," Tony points helpfully.

Seriously, what is with people scowling at him tonight? He's done nothing wrong. Bucky needs a personality transplant. Or another drink or five. Then his face gets even more thunderous.

"Shit," he says quietly, and when Tony looks, for once he can agree. Steve looks cornered between a glamorous woman in a peacock-green dress and a sleek-looking man in a tuxedo. "They've got him well and tight. Can't you do something about that?"

"Me?" Tony asks, shocked.

"Yeah, you. Go do your billionaire philanthropist thing at them until Steve can escape."

Tony would protest, but the truth is, he does know how these things work, all too well. He sighs. There goes his stress-free evening.

"What are you going to do?" he asks suspiciously, because Bucky is eyeing the other side of the room with alacritity. Tony follows his eyes to Peggy, looking killer in a firetruck-red silk dress that Bucky looks like he wants to peel off of her with his teeth, if she'd only let him. Huh. Well, he can't fault the guy's taste. "Uh huh. I see how it is. You leave me to do all the heavy lifting while you swan off with the babe. Low, Barnes."

"Don't let her hear you call her that," Bucky warns with something very much like pride in his voice. Looking at Carter, Tony's perfectly certain that she's got a mean left hook, and resolves to try to not find out. "And anyway," Bucky adds, throwing a look in his direction, "I'm not the one Steve's hoping will rescue him."

"You make him sound like a damsel in distress," Tony quips before his brain catches up with his ears. "What do you mean, you're not the one Steve wants rescuing him? You're his best friend."

"Yeah," Bucky smirks slyly. "I am his best friend. And just you remember that, pal."

Tony has never been so confused in his life. Could be the drink, but he's got an inkling there's something he's missing.

"What I mean," Bucky says, faux-patient, "is I'll break your nose if you fuck him over."

Tony's mouth opens and closes helplessly a few times before he croaks, "Why would I? You two will be off touring the world or whatever soon enough. I'm not gonna see you for ages."

Bucky blinks at him owlishly, looking honestly surprised. "The fuck are you talking about? We're not going anywhere."

Tony rolls his eyes. "Please," he scoffs -- okay, so maybe he's a little bitter about getting left behind yet again, he's not proud of it, but he's only human. "You don't need me anymore. You're famous now. The world's your whatsit. Mollusc. Oyster. Whatever."

Bucky squints at the empty glass in his hand. "How much did you have to drink before I found you?" he asks suspiciously.
"I'm not drunk," Tony insists. "Look." He touches his forefinger to his nose with hardly any effort at all. "See?"

"Why do you think that we're leaving to get to some oyster, then?" Bucky wants to know.

"No, that's not--fuck's sake, Barnes, don't make me say it. You and Steve. You're household names. Everyone knows you, and everyone wants to be you or be with you. You can have anything you want. There's no reason to hang around me anymore. The world's your oyster, see?"

"Why are we talking about crustaceans?" Steve asks from behind them. Tony whirs around, relieved.

"Oh, there you are. See? Free."

Steve looks from him to Bucky, who's still frowning direly, and back. "What are we talking about again?"

"Tony thinks that the world is our oyster now that we're famous and free of him," Bucky says, a confusing weight to his voice.

"What?" Steve says, sounding upset for whatever reason. "Tony--"

"Look, I get it," Tony says, cutting him off. "It's fine. You guys can do whatever it is you've always wanted now that you've won everything under the sun. You can get a sponsorship deal that doesn't make you break out in hives, you can decide on who gets to go out with Carter, you can get on with your lives. It's cool. Call me up, sometime, if you end up States-side, that'd be nice, I'd like that--or don't; you know, whatever. It's fine."

Steve is staring at him with something akin to horror. Tony shrugs defensively, makes a face at Bucky, who is no help whatsoever, standing there scowling with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Tony," Steve says, shaking his head, and god, all Tony wants to do is run and never look back. "Tony, for fuck's sake. You think we stay with you for the money?"

He sounds so honestly insulted that Tony looks away. Steve is having none of that, though; he covers Tony's shoulders with those large, warm hands of his, turns him until Tony has to look up at him or faceplant into his pristine light-blue shirt.

"You," Steve declares, "are an idiot."

Tony blinks. "Well, been called worse things before, this is hardly--"

And then Steve pulls him flush against his chest, and kisses him.

Tony is honestly too shocked to even process that this is happening at all, that there are lips on his and they're soft, and taste like peach juice, because Steve doesn't drink, and there is this scent in his nose that he has honestly been dreaming about for months, what feels like years.

Just as quickly as it happens, it's over; Steve lets him go and takes one large step back, face flaming.

"I am so sorry," he says, low, thready. "I didn't mean to do that, just, the thought that you might think that--God, Tony--but I shouldn't have done that, not without permission, and I'm sorry, I'll understand if you don't want to--"
Yep, peach juice, Tony had it right the first time. He chases the taste into Steve's mouth, between his lips when they fall open on a sigh; Steve's hands clutch at him like he's afraid Tony might disappear into thin air, which is patently ridiculous, Tony isn't going a single place where Steve isn't, right now--ever, really, if he can get away with it. Tony's hand slips into Steve's hair without his volition; it's soft, so soft, though not as soft as his lips moving sweetly, trustingly against Tony's, so delicious that Tony decides then and there that any moment when he is not engaged in kissing them is a moment wasted.

There is noise in his ears, a buzz of voices and the tinkle of glasses and laughter and music, but Tony doesn't think he can be blamed if he ignores all of that, because fuck, it never was important in the first place. All the medals in the world can't compare to this feeling right here; all the wins in his life appear somehow hollow, meaningless when pitted against the contentment of Steve's chest against his, Steve's pleased exhale in his mouth, the little hum of satisfaction in the back of his throat. Tony doesn't think he'll ever find another thing in the world that could be better than this feeling right now.

Tony pulls back after a time, not a clue how long they've been standing there, exploring each other's mouths. Steve whines quietly and sways forward, trying to follow. It warms Tony from the inside out.

"Fucking finally," Bucky says from very close by. Tony turns his head, confused; Bucky is looking away, but there's a pleased curl to his mouth when he cuts his eyes back to Tony. "You can be a bit dense for a genius, billionaire-boy."

Tony opens his mouth to defend himself, incensed, but Steve's hand squeezes his shoulder, and Steve smiles down at him, wide and happy and a little dazed, cheeks dusted with a faint pink, so beautiful that Tony's breath punches out of his chest like a blow. He forgets what he's about to say; forgets anything that isn't Steve, Steve's face, his stupidly gorgeous eyes. He must make some move forward, because Bucky chokes back a laugh and shoves his arm between their chests like a referee.

"Unless you want the whole room on you within the minute, I suggest you take it outside," he says, and Tony looks around, surprised to find the room is just as full as it was before. They're still relatively alone, but he can see the way people glance at them and away, and it's only a matter of time.

He looks at Steve, wondering how to convince him to split, but Steve's one step ahead of him; he closes his hand on Tony's, strong fingers wrapping around his, and tugs in the direction of the garden quad nestled between the hotel and surrounding buildings.

"Come on," he says, voice low and confiding. Tony is maybe in love with him a lot. "This way. I know a shortcut."

Even if he wanted to, Tony could have done little else than nod, because his mouth seems to have forgotten how to work. He throws Bucky a look; he waves them off with an indulgent smile.

"Go on, lovebirds. You'll have the place to yourselves. I'm staying at Peggy's, and I'm sure Rhodey will find someone to put him up for the night. I'll find him, I promise. Be safe," he adds, slightly louder than he needs to, and Tony makes a face at him even as, to his shock, he finds himself giggling like a schoolboy, almost sick with excitement. The blush on Steve's cheeks has deepened when Tony turns to follow; it's a good look on him. Tony can't wait to find how far down it reaches.

They sneak out without issue; no one stops them, which is a minor miracle, but Tony will take it
and be grateful. The garden is deserted when they make their way out of the double doors, and Steve leads the way down a tiny passage that opens across the street from Hyde Park, dark in the middle of the night apart from strings of lights that follow the alleyways, in celebration of the end of the Olympics.

"What now?" Tony asks, voice hushed even though there's no need to be -- they are all alone.

"Now," Steve drawls thoughtfully, "we could take a cab, I suppose, I mean, the penthouse is pretty far away -- or we could--"

"Walk," Tony finishes with him, squeezing lightly at Steve's hand in his and smiling. "Yeah. Let's do that."

Steve grins back, ducking his head; he hesitates, an aborted movement that Tony wonders at before realising that Steve wanted to kiss him, but didn't know if he could. Heat blooms in his gut like a miniature explosion of love and need and lust, and he fists his hand in the front of Steve's shirt, pulls him in, steps back until his back is plastered to the outer wall of the hotel. Steve presses himself against him gratifyingly quickly, lips descending eagerly against Tony's, nipping a little at Tony's mouth before pushing it open, licking his way inside slow and a little dirty, enough to make Tony groan helplessly into it. His hands clutch at Steve's arms, slide around his back, fingers digging in as he drags Steve closer, as close as he can get. His chest is hot against Tony's despite the cool night air, the chill of the wall at his back; the contrast makes Tony buck helplessly forward, want more contact, more kissing, more everything.

Steve pulls back after a moment, breathing too fast. It rushes against Tony's wet lips, making them tingle. That this, between them, can make Steve the distance swimmer out of breath is something Tony is going to fucking cherish.

"We should go," Steve says roughly, dragging a thumb over Tony's bruised lower lip; Tony wants to take it in his mouth desperately, stops himself with a superhuman effort. "Otherwise I'm going to fuck you against this wall, and I'm sure neither of us are going to be too comfortable doing that."

"Speak for yourself," Tony croaks, visual swimming through his mind until his knees tremble.

Steve laughs, low and pleased, eyes glinting in challenge, swiping his tongue against his plush lower lip. Tony might whimper a little.

"Come on," Steve says, reaching for Tony's hand again. Tony takes it without hesitation. "We can be there in half an hour if we don't linger."

Considering that Tony wants to press him against any and every available surface and do unspeakable things to him, he rather thinks lingering is more of a given than a variable, but he says nothing. Let Steve have his illusions. His cock is aching in his pants, but Tony ignores it without a second thought; they'll have time aplenty later, for all the things that strike their fancy. Steve likes walking, and what Steve likes Tony is going to make damn sure Steve gets.

And if that happens to include his own person, as apparently it does, well. Tony doesn't intend to waste that gift.

---
From: vpotts@pottspt.com
To: tstark@starkindustries.net
Date: August 13, 2012 12:18
Subject: hellooooo

Tonyyyyy? You're not answering your phone, Tony~! ;P

Pepper

Virginia Potts
Physical Therapist
Potts PT, Fitness & Wellness

---

From: tstark@starkindustries.net
To: vpotts@pottspt.com
Date: August 13, 2012 12:29
Subject: Re: hellooooo

whoever taught you to use emoticons is an evil uncaring person. :( and no, i am not answering my phone, because i am in fact busy. with things. and i'll not be answering my phone for a while. say like the next week. and you can stop ringing Steve's phone, too, tell Bucky to fuck off, we'll call him later when we're not doing things.

oh hey can you email Jarvis and tell him i'm taking a couple weeks off? maybe three. a month tops. okay thanks ilove you pepper now goaway steve's doinga thign okaybye

Anthony Stark
CEO
Stark Industries
New York/Los Angeles/Sydney/Tokyo/Hong Kong/London

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End Notes

Notes: This fic would certainly not exist without the amazing support of a huge number of people. Laria_Gwyn, who betaed this mindblowingly fast, with her usual spot-on eye for detail and unfailing support, who talked me off ledges and held my hand throughout.
Authocracy, for swamping me with swimming information until I was rolling gleefully around the 10,000 words of research that zie put together for me, wondering just which juicy tidbits to include. Someidiothasice, for letting me CAPSLOCK at her in the middle of the night and listening and offering excellent suggestions that kept me sane. For all my people on Twitter, who listened to me yammer on and on about this bloody fic that took over my life, and not only didn't tell me to shut up once, they also threw all kinds of inspiration at me in the hopes it'll help. This one's for all of you, you amazing, perfect human beings. ♥

Title from, yes, the same song by Ol' Blue Eyes.

Works inspired by this [me got you under my skin [PODfic] by Opalsong](http://archiveofourtime.org/works/123456)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://archiveofourtime.org/works/123456) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!